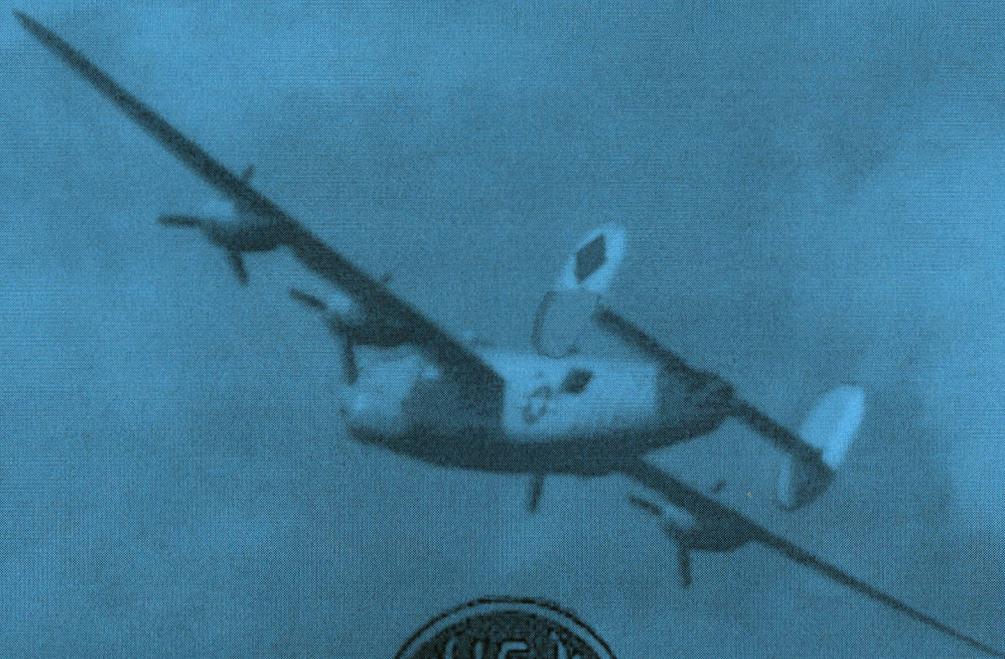
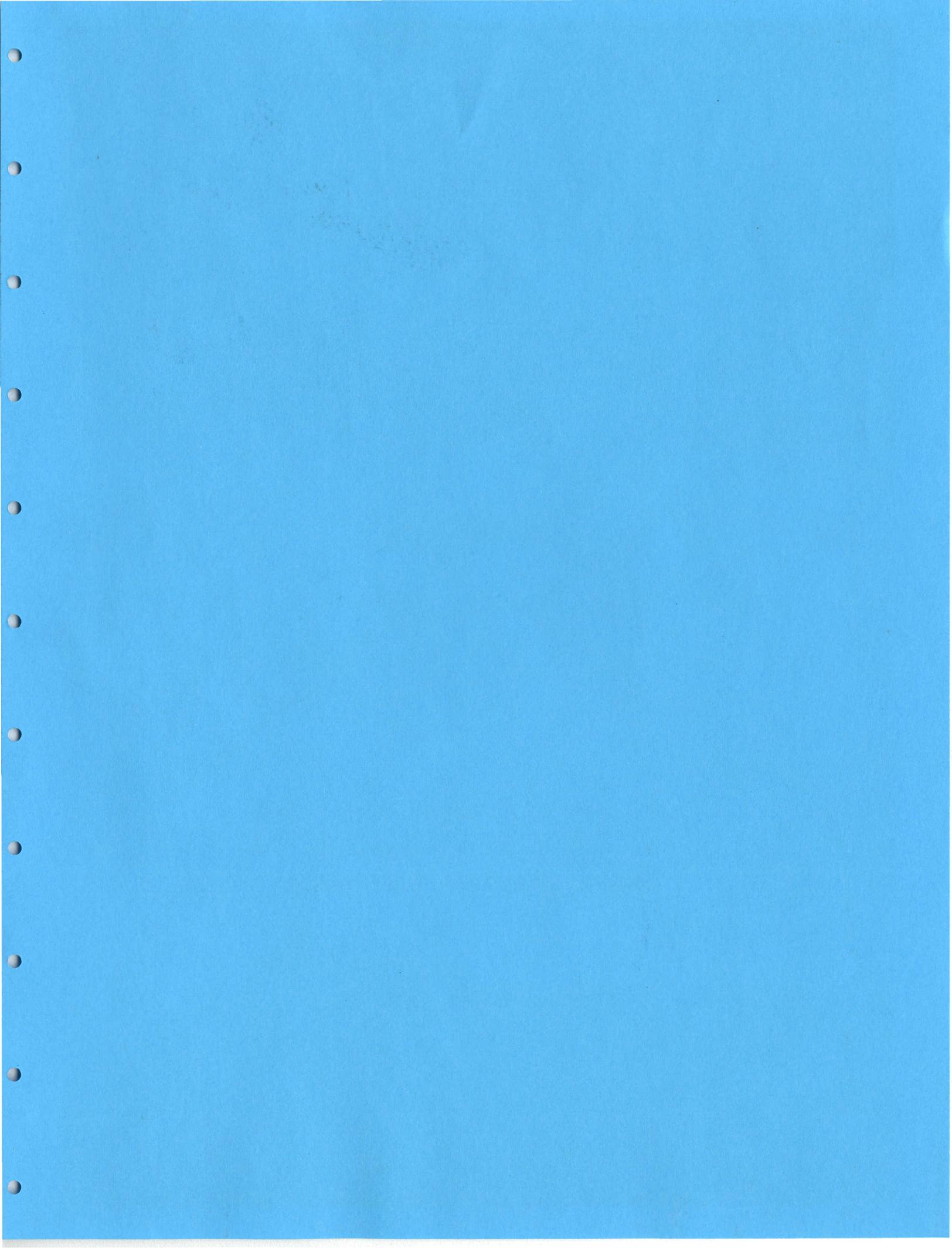


What Kind of a War Was it?

Stories and Anecdotes by the
Copilot of Crew #2836
Steed's Flying Colts



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456th Bomb Group (Heavy)
15th USAAF



Preface

For many years, I gave little thought to my wartime experiences. I was busy building a career and raising a family. Yet, I was aware that the things I experienced in the war had affected me. I had entered the Army in February, 1943 as a raw country boy just out of high school, When I was discharged in November, 1945 I was certainly a very different person.

My military tour was unique but not remarkable. Unique because the specifics were different from every other person's; unremarkable because it was, in general, so very much like that of many others. I was not a hero; I wasn't wounded or taken prisoner. My contribution to the country's effort was in no way outstanding. I was faced with neither the necessity nor the opportunity to do heroic things. When the war ended, I promptly and eagerly returned to civilian life, anxious to put my military "career" behind me.

Over the years, as I have told parts of these stories to my children, they suggested "Dad, why don't you write up these stories?" Shortly after retiring in 1991 I began jotting down the details of the more interesting incidents that I remembered.

As I began to write and dig into old records, I became curious about what happened to my old crewmates and started an effort to re-establish contact with them. At about the time I started writing, the 456th Bomb Group Association – an organization of veterans of the group in which I served – published an excellent book on the history of our group.¹ This sparked my interest in expanding my jottings to cover the whole span of the time I spent in the Air Corps.

It has not been an easy task. My discharge is dated exactly fifty-two years earlier than the date on this preface. While I have my log books, my Army Personnel File and most of my orders, I did not keep a diary during the war. Many details have dropped out of memory and others have doubtless become distorted over time. I have borrowed from many published sources, including the 456th History and Bob Capps' fine recital of his experience as a Flying Colt.² I have also discussed many details with crewmembers and other veterans at our Group's reunions. In the last analysis, I have relied on my own memory, feelings and interpretations, right or wrong.

While I started writing in response to suggestions from my children, I have continued out of personal pleasure and as a small way of saying to, and for the others involved, that I think what we did was important.

What has resulted is a collection of stories and anecdotes about my time in the service. Don't expect them to add to or illuminate the history of World War II. The libraries are full of the works of authors who do that much better than I ever could. Don't look for a political slant – in 1944 I was neither a hawk nor a dove. Also, I chose to exclude details of the horror and cruelty of the war. The war was indeed a barbaric and terrible thing and my omission of those details should not be taken as an indication that I believe otherwise.

Joseph W. Shuster

Alexandria, Virginia

November 4, 1997

Revised April 16, 2000

¹ Fred H. Riley, 456th Bomb Group – Steed's Flying Colts (Paducah, Ky: Turner Publishing Company, 1994)

² Robert S. Capps, Col. USAF Ret., Flying Colt – Liberator Pilot in Italy (Alexandria VA; Manor House Publications, 1977)

What Kind of a War Was It?

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Chapter 1

Induction to Army Life

After graduating from high school in 1942, I spent the summer as counselor at Camp Miller, a Lutheran camp for boys on the Delaware River near Stroudsburg where I had been a camper previous summers.

That fall I entered Gettysburg College on a scholarship from a Hazleton banker whose son, Alvin Kirschner, had been killed in the first World War. I pledged to Phi Sigma Kappa Fraternity, joined the wrestling team and was accepted into the Choir directed by Parker B. Wagnild, one of the idols of my young life.

By November, the war situation had worsened and we were all concerned about the draft. We felt certain to be called but hoped to be allowed to finish the school year before we had to go. The school president, who bragged of his Washington connections, announced that any college student in the reserves would be 'frozen', i.e. not called until the end of the school year. I applied for pilot training under the Air Force Reserve program but failed the physical due to a broken nose – a relic of high school football. I submitted a letter from my doctor and was granted a second examination.

Before I received the results of the re-exam, the government announced that all reserve enlistments would be closed the following week. The Air Force recruiter advised me to join the Army Reserve to avoid being drafted. He assured me that if the Air Force accepted me as the result of the re-test, I could easily transfer from the Army.

I joined the Army Reserve on December 13, 1942 thinking, like most of the other men in school, I was set for the remainder of that school year.

But early in February, as the college president was speaking at morning chapel, assuring us that we reservists were frozen for the year, a student interrupted him, waving a long letter which announced that all of the reservists were called to report

Chapter 1- Induction into Army Life

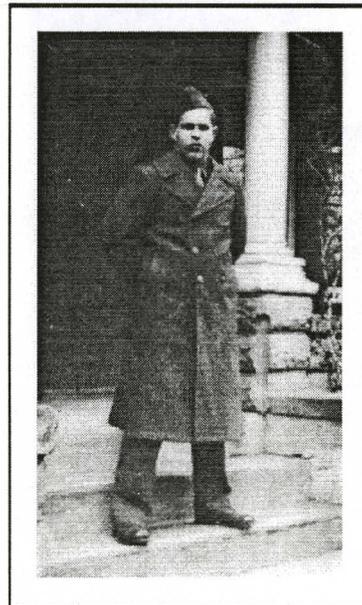
for duty in two weeks. This event became known at Gettysburg as the Great Thaw.

In a panic I called the Air Force recruiter. He had not received notice of the results of my physical but said that even if I was in the Army, the Air Force would arrange a transfer to flight school if I passed the physical. I really didn't have any choice but to report as ordered.

On February 13, 1943 I reported to the induction center in New Cumberland, Pennsylvania – on crutches. I had sprained my ankle in a wrestling match the day before. I was excused from processing for one day because of my ankle then began the program of physicals, aptitude testing, etc. that was standard for all recruits. As instructed by the Air Force recruiter, I told everyone I met they shouldn't send me to basic training because any day now a transfer would come in from the Air Force. Be absolutely clear about this. I had no faith whatsoever that this would do me any good; I knew I was doomed to be a foot soldier. But to my amazement – it worked. A week later, after all the guys who came in with me had been shipped off to basic training, I was "attached, unassigned" to the sergeant of my company. He told me to report to the police officer every morning. I thought I was going to help the MPs but in Army terms, policing means maintaining the grounds. When the recruits were not busy processing they were put to work on a variety of duties. My first day, the police officer assigned me two men and a lawn mower and I supervised the mowing of lawns around the chapel. Each day it was a different job. My most exalted assignment came when he assigned me to supervise 300 men loading dirt into dump trucks for a fill project. I am still amazed at a 18 year old kid with two weeks Army experience and no training being given such responsibility.

This routine lasted for two months. Several times I was able to hitch-hike home to Hazleton on Friday night and catch another ride back on Sunday. One Friday I got home to find that Dad had a heart attack that day and was in the hospital. He was doing well but Mother said they couldn't find a substitute for him so I would have to conduct the service on Sunday. Dad had written his sermon before the attack so all I had to do was read it. Everybody in the church was anxious about Dad and very sympathetic to Mother and me so it went well. Dad was in the hospital several weeks but I didn't have to preach again.

Finally at the end of March orders came from the Air Force transferring me to Aviation Cadet training and I shipped off to Nashville, Tennessee. This was the dreaded selection center where a devilishly designed battery of physical, mental and "psycho-motor" tests would determine whether you would be sent to pilot school, my first choice, navigator or bombardier school, second

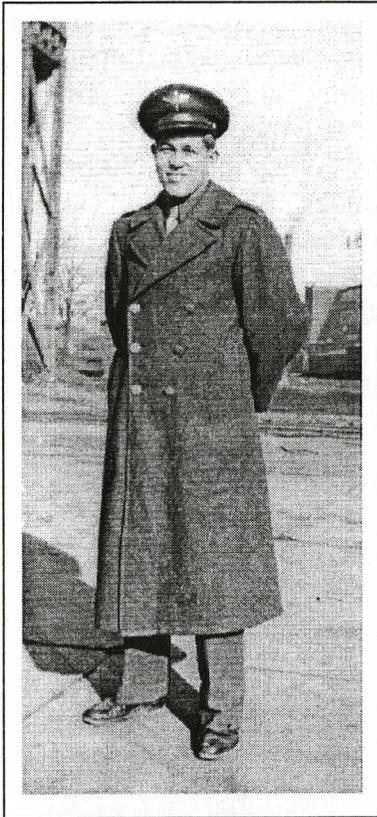


Private Shuster

Chapter 1- Induction into Army Life

choice because I would be an officer, gunnery school, at least I would be flying, or ground duty, the worst outcome.

The psycho-motor tests were insidious. They purported to measure your physical aptitude, mental skill and psychological profile all at once. For example, one fiendish device was a revolving disc, like a phonograph record, with a brass spot the size of a nickel near one edge. You were to hold a stylus on this spot while the disc revolved. The stylus was hinged so you couldn't maintain contact by pressing on it. Each time the stylus slipped off the brass spot a buzzer would sound and you were penalized one point. Further, the brass spot was itself located on a smaller disc imbedded in the large one and it rotated in the opposite direction to the big disc, making an erratic pattern to follow. To make it harder, the rotation speed of the discs varied throughout the tests. It took all your concentration to keep that damn thing from buzzing at you. So much for the 'motor' part.



Aviation Cadet

After a warm-up they began the 'psycho' part of the test. While you were concentrating on the brass disc, the proctor would turn up the pressure by asking you questions. What is your serial number? "What is the square root of 98?" "How many square feet in a plot of land 620 feet by 12 yards?" "Recite your serial number backwards!" He would throw in helpful comments to add to the pressure. "You have 20 misses already, you'll never get to pilot school with this many errors". Each test would last several minutes then he would start you again, turning up the speed on the machine and asking more and more difficult questions until the stress was almost unbearable. That was the point of the testing, to see how you functioned, mentally and physically under pressure. After an hour on one of these machines I was exhausted and damp with sweat. And this went on for two weeks! It was positively the worst two weeks of my life. But I did well enough to be accepted for pilot training and was transferred to Montgomery, Alabama for the pre-flight course.

Chapter 2

Becoming a Pilot – Army Style

Pre-flight Training – Maxwell Field, Montgomery, Alabama – May and June, 1943

I was in the class of 44-A, scheduled to graduate in January of 1944. ("B" classes graduated in February, "C" classes in March, and so forth.)

Our transport to Montgomery was a troop train of old wooden rail cars with wooden seats and gas lights. We joked that we were in the same car that Lincoln rode to Gettysburg. The trip took a couple of days and we slept on the floor, in the seats, and some of the more creative guys took off the washroom doors and laid them on top of the seat backs to lie down. We ate out of mess kits filled by cooks that came through the cars with big buckets of stew or something.

It was my first trip through the south and I was fascinated by the different scenery. The trees were different – we traveled through long stretches of tall pine forests. I was fascinated with the big oaks festooned with Spanish moss.

Railroads go through the poor sections of cities and towns. In the south, this meant the black section. I was really appalled at the living conditions. Ramshackle houses, some with no doors or windows and kids running around half clothed and dirty was all new to me. I had seen poor sections of towns up north but never anything quite as bad as the conditions I saw on this trip.

Pre-flight training can be described as 60 days' worth of West Point. I guess there were nearly a thousand cadets in all. Each company had both upperclassmen, cadets who were in their second month and underclassmen, the first month cadets. We studied military rules and behavior, meteorology, navigation, aerodynamics, mechanics and math. We learned the manual of arms, practiced short order drill and studied military organization, strategy and tactics. The academics were hard; we stayed up late each night doing homework. We had parades and ceremonies just like the real army.

The training included plenty of the traditional military hazing but it served a purpose.

Chapter 2 – Becoming a Pilot – Army Style

You not only learned to follow orders, no matter how silly but our hazing had been designed to teach other things as well. For example, at meals, underclassmen had to sit in an exaggerated position of attention with their eyes focused constantly in the center of their (empty) plates. The serving plates were passed to the eaters only in response to a specific request, i.e. "Please pass the mashed potatoes, Sir." The cadet who made the request would help himself and return the plate to the table. It was forbidden to "short stop", i.e. help yourself to potatoes as the dish came past you. This presented no problem for upperclassmen since they could gaze around the table and see what was available. As an underclassmen you had a problem. You couldn't ask for a dish without knowing exactly what it was. "Pass the meat" was not sufficient. You had to say "the fried chicken" or the sliced pork roast". With your eyes fixed on your plate you had to stretch your vision to identify the various dishes. Sneaking a peak got you demerits. But after a month the effective range of your peripheral vision was markedly improved and that's important for pilots.

We were given demerits for every infraction of the rules. Demerits had to be "walked off" by marching around the parade area with full pack and rifle during free time at the rate of one hour per demerit.

To me the hazing was a bore, but it only lasted a month and then we got to be the hazers. Prior to our class, almost all cadets had come directly from civilian life. Enlisted men could enter the program but had to give up their former rating and pay – a tough sacrifice for sergeants and master sergeants. With 44-A the rules were changed to allow enlisted men to keep their rank and pay during the cadet program and as a result we had a lot of men with several years of army service in our class. It was especially tough on those "old-timers" to take hazing from upperclassmen who had been civilians two months before.

We had plenty of rigorous physical training (PT). Each day we would line up and double-time to the PT grounds for a two-hour workout. We did calisthenics, worked on gym equipment like parallel bars and trampolines, ran obstacle courses and played games like 6-man touch football. They really pushed us hard. One day we started out jogging, but our PT instructor led us straight past the PT grounds. The instructor said nothing but just kept up his "hup, hup" chant. We all wondered where we were going, but he wouldn't give us a clue. We ran right through the camp office area and headed out around the perimeter of the airfield. Pretty soon we saw we were headed for the officers club. One wag whispered that we were going to the club for a swim in the pool. Fat chance.

As we reached the end of the runway about a quarter of the way around the field our formation began to stretch out and a really nasty rumor spread through our ranks – that crazy instructor was going to run us all the way around the airport in the middle of a hot summer day! And that's exactly what he did. By the time we were half way around guys were beginning to drop out of the jog and walk. I've never been much of a runner and I was terribly afraid I wouldn't be able to make it. Competition for pilot assignments was fierce and cadets were washed out every day. Any little failure could have you sent to the infantry. How I made that run, I'll never know but I was still in the pack when he challenged us to make an impression by closing ranks and singing the Air Force song as we entered our barracks area. I learned later that it was nine miles around the airport.

Chapter 2 – Becoming a Pilot – Army Style

We were never allowed off the base so I never saw anything of Montgomery. I finished pre-flight on schedule and went on to the next step.

Primary Flight Training – Dorr Field, Arcadia, Florida – July and August, 1943

Arcadia was a sleepy little town in the swampy plain between Okeechobee and Tampa. The main industry was cattle ranching and I was amazed to see cowboys riding through town just like in the old west.

Dorr Field was a small and pretty camp. The stucco barracks were new and surrounded a grassy area with a swimming pool in the center decorated by palm trees. But it was hot, humid and buggy. We learned to stuff our leather boots with newspaper every night. Otherwise, they would be filled with mildew the next morning and there was a good chance a scorpion or centipede would make a nest in them overnight. The mosquitoes were so big they would turn over your dog tags to check your blood type before deciding who to drain! Another distasteful feature was the drinking water – it was extremely sulfurous. You had to hold your nose while taking a drink from the water fountain, it smelled so bad.

We spent half a day in ground school studying navigation, mechanics, aerodynamics and meteorology. Ground school was a grind and they really threw a lot at you. We had heavy physical training workouts as well. We all worked very hard and stayed up late with homework every night. There was a seven minute break between classes and we would lie on the cement sidewalk (lying on the lawn would produce grass stains on your uniform) between classes and actually go to sleep.

The other half of the day was spent flying that beautiful little Stearman PT-17. The Stearman was a joy to fly, very responsive and with plenty of power to do neat acrobatics. An open cockpit bi-plane, it had a single 225 HP Continental radial engine giving it a top speed of 225 MPH.



The student sat in the front seat – instructor in the rear. Communication was via a "Gosport Tube" – a long rubber tube with a funnel mouthpiece on the instructor's end. At the student's end, the tube yoked into two tubes which fit little flat funnels built into the student's helmet. In effect, it was a long stethoscope running from the instructor's mouth to the student's ears. It was primitive but effective. There was also a rear view mirror which allowed the instructor and student to look at each other.

My instructor was Cecil F. Littleton, a tough, cigar-chewing man about 40 who had been a barnstormer before the war. I was scared of him for a long time but he turned out to be a great instructor. The standard format for the first ride called for the instructor to take you up and "wring you out". It helped him get a feel of your temperament and

Chapter 2 – Becoming a Pilot – Army Style

tolerance for extreme maneuvers and demonstrated to the student how versatile and sturdy the Stearman was. I was impressed – and very happy I didn't get sick. The scariest maneuver was inverted flight. The instructor slowly rolls the plane – stopping when you're upside down. Before long you realize that only your seat belt is keeping you from falling out of the cockpit.

Cadet Murphy was our squadron character. It's easy to find Murphy in the squadron picture – he's the one in the front row with a white flight suit. Actually, it's the same standard suit we were all wearing. Except ours were new and Murphy's had been bleached white by the sun as the result of hundreds of hours in the gunner's seat of a dive bomber. Murphy had completed a combat tour in the Pacific theater and was a real veteran.

Murphy challenged his instructor on his first flight. The instructor turned the plane upside down and Murphy waited until he turned to check for traffic. While he was looking away, Murphy ducked down in his seat and pulled the Gosport tubes loose from his helmet. When the instructor looked back to the front he saw an empty cockpit and Gosport tubes flapping in the slipstream. He concluded that Murphy's seat belt had either



SQUADRON 6 (left to right)
BOTTOM ROW: Carroll, Chipkevich, Hoopes, Bourque, Foret, Murphy, Thompson, Sheppard, Ball. SEC-
OND ROW: Ross, Ferguson, Haas, Hartley, Belyeu, Albach, Maki, Benoit, Lowers, Nuest. THIRD ROW:
Brown, Moseley, Lenz, Dolwick, Hawkins, Baker, Dick, Evans, Hodel. TOP ROW: Hansley, Pierce, Roth,
Charleville, Shuster, Massey, May, Oxley.

come loose or had never been fastened and that his student had fallen out of the airplane! In a panic, he twisted the airplane this way and that as he desperately sought a glimpse of a parachute – but to no avail.

Then Murphy "miraculously" reappeared and the instructor knew he had been taken. It was the start of a beautiful relationship between those two.

Each instructor had four or five students and while one was in the air, the rest of us

Chapter 2 – Becoming a Pilot – Army Style

watched, did homework and shared our excitement and fears. The training method was tough. You not only had to learn to fly, you had to fly under great stress. Thus the instructors were deliberately mean and insulting. They were constantly trying to get you to blow up. Most of us accepted this as a valid preparation for flying in combat where we would have to deal with much greater stress than verbal insults. The washout rate in primary was something like forty percent, not because of a lack of flying skill but because some guys would not, or could not, put up with the strain.

I didn't mind the verbal abuse but my instructor had a tactic which really bugged me. The instructor's joystick (the flight control lever) was much longer than the student's. This allowed him to override the student's hold in case the student froze on the controls. When I did something particularly bad, in his opinion, he would grab the stick and thrash it from side to side. The instructor's rear cockpit was wider than the student's which meant that, even though I spread my legs as wide as possible, his thrashing was beating my knees with the stick and banging them against the side of the cockpit. When we went swimming, you could identify the students whose instructors used this tactic by their black and blue knees!

As I neared the eight hour target for my solo flight the tension really started to build. There were days when I was ready and others when I thought he would never turn me loose. Dorr had a couple of auxiliary landing strips to relieve the congestion at the main strip when everybody wanted to practice landings at the same time. One day we were shooting landings at one of these strips when he pulled off the runway, got out of the airplane and told me to take it around by myself. Gulp!

It is possible to be scared and exhilarated at the same time. As I taxied into position I frantically ran through a mental check list of everything he had ever told me. Finally, I was at the end of the runway and completely out of excuses for any further delay. Just before giving her full throttle I looked in the mirror – boy, did that back seat look empty?

The take-off went fine. I was surprised how much quicker she came off the ground without his weight and began thinking about what adjustment I would have to make in the landing to accommodate this weight loss. I decided to put the base leg further out to make sure I didn't overshoot the short field. As I turned on the final approach I looked up and saw him standing by the runway puffing on his cigar. Before I could decide whether he seemed calm or nervous the ground came up to meet me and I settled smoothly into my first solo landing. Even he said he was pleased and sent me back up for three or four more landings. They were more fun because I was more relaxed but nothing compares with the emotional rush you get after your first solo take-off when you realize you absolutely must land this thing by yourself.

While my solo went smoothly, Murphy's turned into a bit of adventure. One afternoon, my instructor and I passed an auxiliary strip and saw Murphy's instructor frantically waving at us from the ground. Then we noticed Murphy flying alone in the pattern. We followed Murphy in for a landing. He made a perfect pattern, approach and letdown but at the last minute gave her take-off power and pulled up to go around again. We landed and Murphy's instructor told us this was the tenth time he had gone around. Murphy's instructor was not only mad, he was sopping wet. Many small thunderstorms pass over that part of Florida every summer afternoon and he had been thoroughly

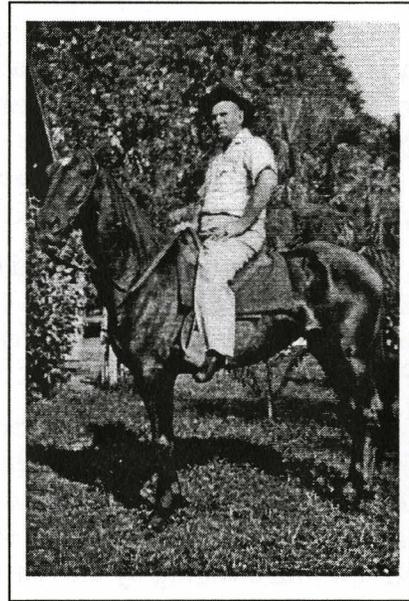
Chapter 2 – Becoming a Pilot – Army Style

drenched while Murphy just flew around the storms until they passed over. As we watched Murphy come in for another try, my instructor told me, "If he doesn't land this time, you get out and I'll go up and force him down!" He knew Murphy had only enough gas for a couple more tries. Well, this time Murphy put her on the ground as we all cheered. (I was kind of sorry I didn't get to see how my instructor was going to force him down.)

We didn't stay around to hear the chewing out Murphy got but went back to the base where I had a great time relating the story of Murphy's solo.

Arcadia is on the Tamiami Trail – a two-lane road that runs straight as an arrow across the flat central Florida prairie.. During wartime there wasn't much traffic except for the big semi-trailers hauling cattle to market. These trucks were too much temptation to ignore. It was considered great sport to fly down the road about ten miles ahead of a truck and then turn toward him flying with your wheels a few feet off the road. Pretty soon the truck comes into view and you wait until the last minute to pull up! We used to get a lecture at least once a week about harassing the cattle trucks.

We were allowed to go off base on weekends. Since Arcadia was horse country, the first Saturday I went to town and inquired for a place to rent a horse to ride. There was no livery stable but someone referred me to a Jerry Taylor, saying he had a few horses and sometimes let people ride them. I walked to his house and met Jerry. He showed me his horses and we talked and then his wife Helen called us in for some iced tea and we talked some more. Finally he told me that if I returned the following morning I could ride. The next morning I found them both waiting and a third horse all saddled. I jumped on and we headed out into the prairie. As we went along we met other friends of theirs also out riding. I was properly introduced and everybody was very friendly. When I had asked, the day before, what the charge would be, he put me off saying that we would work out something suitable. I had only expected to ride for an hour and after we had been out over two hours and a half I began to worry that I didn't have enough money with me.



Jerry Taylor

It turned out that this was their regular Sunday morning habit. After church, they would gather and ride out into the country and stop in at some friend's for some ice tea or other refreshments. Well, it was almost four hours before we got back to his house. Then Helen insisted I stay for lunch, and I did. As I left I offered to pay for the ride but Jerry refused. What a nice day I had.

But there's more to the story. Jerry worked in the control tower at the field and the following week I got a message to report to him there. I had no idea what was up, but I went. He surprised me by inviting me to spend my weekends with them. He explained they had an extra bedroom with a private entrance so I could come and go as I pleased. I

was flabbergasted and gratefully accepted. I spent every weekend I could get off with them, almost like a member of the family. On Saturdays I rode their horses, mucked out



the stables, cleaned the saddles and did other little chores. On Sundays I went with them on their regular ride. On the last weekend, Helen told me they had lost a son who would have been about my age and that they enjoyed having me around. Whatever their reason, I have never been more wonderfully treated. For years we kept in touch through Christmas cards and I'll always remember their kindness.

Charleville, Shuster, Roth
Dorr Field, Florida

My buddies at Dorr were Denver Charleville and Art Roth. Art went to a different basic school and I lost track of him but Denver and I stayed together all through flight training. His father, incidentally, was Vice President of Sales for Western Air Lines. Little did we guess that ten years later I would work for the same company.

Before graduation day we were given one last, special ride with our instructor. This time, he sat in the front seat wearing the Gosport tubes and you got to be the instructor. Under the rules, you could get even with him for all the mean things he did to you. For me it was a purely token ride. I really liked my instructor and appreciated how hard he worked to make a pilot out of me.

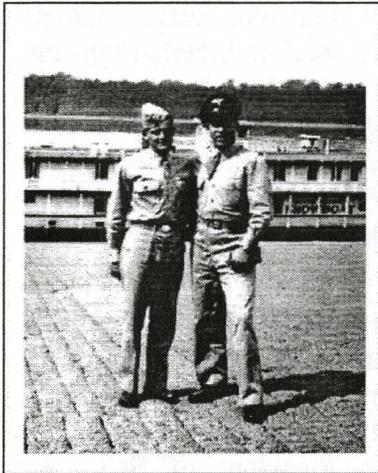
However, Murphy's last ride was special. As you might expect after Murphy's pretended fall from the airplane and his soloing fiasco, his instructor was merciless to him all through training. So Murphy sought his final revenge on his last ride.

The front seat of the Stearman had about two feet of vertical travel. While flying, you put the seat way down so your head was just above the cockpit. The Stearman was a tail dragger, i.e. it had no nose wheel and it was hard to see over the big radial engine while taxiing. Thus the seat could be raised way up for increased visibility while on the ground.

Anyway, here's how Murphy got even. At one point in the exercise he told the instructor to turn the plane upside down – which he did. Then Murphy, using a piece of wire which he had prepared for this purpose, reached forward and pulled on the locking handle of the instructor's seat!

Pity the poor instructor, upside down over the Florida swamps, hanging by his seat belt when, without warning, his seat seemingly comes loose from the airplane and he begins falling toward the earth. Yes, I know he only fell two feet before he stopped but you know his heart did several flip flops during that fraction of a second.

Basic Flight Training – Greenville AAB, Greenville, Mississippi September and October, 1943



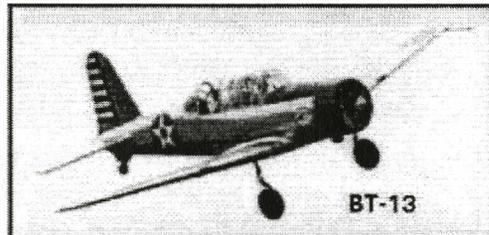
With Denver on the levee at Greenville, Miss.

While we still were fearful of washing out, we were over the big hump – the average washout rate in basic was only 13 percent.

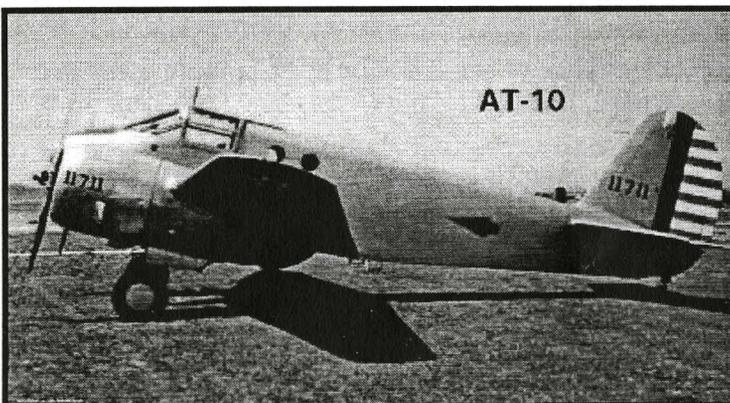
Primary and basic training was the same for all pilots but there were two kinds of school for the advanced phase. Those destined to be fighter pilots were sent to a single-engine school and flew the AT-6; those marked for bombers were sent to a twin-engine school. Most of us, including me, wanted to be fighter pilots and the big question was whether we would be sent to a single-engine or a twin-engine school.

Greenville is on the Mississippi River in the heart of Dixie. I didn't see much of the town and I didn't meet anybody like the Taylors. Denver and I went to town a couple of times and poked around the river landing, but that's all I remember.

The airplane we flew was the BT-13, a low-wing, single engine trainer with a 450HP engine. A variable speed prop, fuel mixture controls and a radio all added complications. It had a fixed landing gear and was a dog to fly – we called it the Vultee Vibrator – nobody liked it. Flying got more serious here. We had cross-county flights, simulated instrument flying, night flying and even a scary night cross-country flight. The ground school got more intense as well.



Advanced Flight Training – Freeman Field, Seymore, Indiana – November and December, 1943



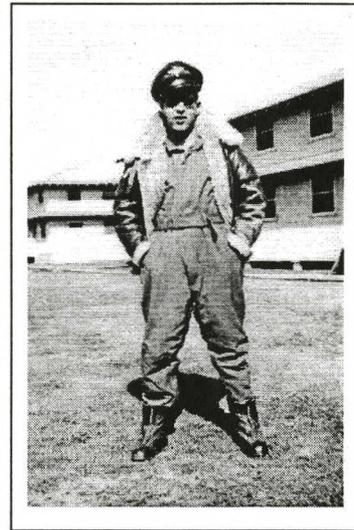
longer, usually two hours without a break, and sometimes longer.

This was a twin-engine school and the airplane we used was the AT-10. In many ways it was fun. The complexity of two engines with variable pitch propellers added considerable interest to our training, as did the retractable landing gear. And you got to fly with a buddy. Because of the two man crew our training flights were

Chapter 2 – Becoming a Pilot – Army Style

The only on-board amenity to accommodate these longer flights was a relief tube located at the back of the flight deck. This was simply a small funnel attached to a rubber hose running to the outside. It served adequately as a urinal, however, two hands were necessary for its operation. We avoided having to use it whenever possible because it meant leaving your seat for the back of the cockpit where there were no handholds, even if you could manage to free up a hand – so to speak. This was too much temptation for your buddy up front flying the plane by himself.

By putting the ship into a shallow dive at full throttle to pick up speed, then pulling up into a shallow climb and, at the critical moment, pushing the nose down, he could cause a minus G force, lifting you off your feet at a very inopportune moment. Even though it lasted only for a few seconds, the result could be uncomfortable and messy.



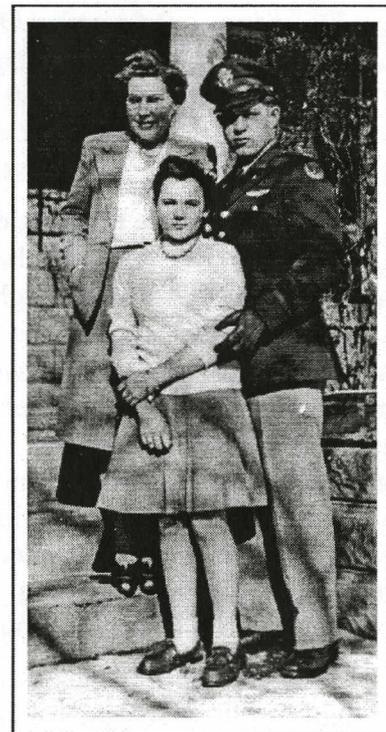
Almost a pilot



Lt. Shuster & Dad

The big let down was that they didn't teach acrobatics but we managed to have some fun anyway. Once on a long cross country flight to Louisiana for high-altitude training we flew for hours over farm country. With one man to fly and the other to watch out for telephone wires, we flew most of the way at tree-top height, buzzing cattle and mules all over Mississippi.

Finally, on January 7, 1944, I was commissioned a Second Lieutenant and awarded pilot wings. Mother, Dad, Grandma Winters, Aunt Bett and Aunt Dot came out to see me graduate. As you might imagine it was a proud and happy day for me.



With Mother and sister Patty

Chapter 3

The Crew is Formed

Salt Lake City, Utah – January 1944

After a pleasant week at home I boarded a train to the 18th Replacement Wing at an air base near Salt Lake City where we would be formed into crews. This was my first time in the west and I was impressed with the beauty of the city and the snow-covered mountains. I met Denver there and we took the tour of Temple Square – headquarters of the LDS (Mormon) Church. Our only duty was to complete one hour of Link¹ training, qualify on the .45 pistol and show up every day at eleven AM. to see if our orders had been issued. Denver and I had been trained on the .45 and we both liked to shoot so we got the hour of Link out of the way and headed for the pistol range. The sergeant told us we could come back as often as we liked until we scored well enough to qualify.

We worked out a pleasant daily routine. After breakfast we went to the pistol range and practiced with the .45, being careful not to score high enough to qualify. The sergeant spotted our game right off but didn't object. Actually, he took a liking to us because we really enjoyed shooting. After an hour or so we went back to the barracks, put on our dress uniform and went to the daily lineup. Right after lunch we went to town on the bus. We spent all afternoon in the gym at the Mormon Church YMCA playing basketball, working with the weights and other gym equipment. I even wrestled with a group of pro wrestlers (old men who came there to practice and keep in shape). We ended our workout with a swim, sauna and shower before heading for a local restaurant for a steak dinner. After dinner we went to a movie or to the big roller skating rink. Salt Lake was full of pretty young girls and the skating rink was a good place to meet them. Sometimes we were lucky enough to get a couple to go out for a coke after skating.

After following this daily routine for three weeks we were in top physical shape and our skills with the .45 and roller skates improved as well.

¹An instrument flying simulator

Chapter 3 – The Crew is Formed

On February 1, orders were issued forming Crew #2836 and we had our first awkward meeting. Here was a bunch of men from all over the United States meeting for the first time and knowing we would spend a lot of time together under quite strained circumstances. Everybody was polite, friendly, yet reserved – we were all checking each other out.

This was our crew:

Nedgel R. Leathers – Aircraft Commander (Pilot) A country boy like I was, Ned grew up on a farm in Toone, Tennessee, 40 miles from Memphis. After graduating from high school he went into pilot training. Ned was steady, solid, predictable and guileless; he knew his job and did it well, mainly because he could not be diverted or distracted. He was genuinely fascinated when faced with something new – like a foreign legion latrine or an Italian Opera. Ned was an excellent pilot and a perfect commander, the kind that is so competent he didn't have to command – just let his wishes be clearly known.

Donald A. Fischer – Navigator Sober and scholarly, as most navigators were, Don came from Saginaw, Michigan where he had completed several years of college before joining the Air Corp. An excellent navigator, he was dedicated and serious in way that bespoke his German heritage. He was pleasant and cooperative but not as wild and adventurous as some. He was a couple of years older than I and, being married, he did not participate in our partying. Actually, Don joined us after we got to Tucson.

Robert W. Bureau – Bombardier Bob was the crew's spark plug, always coming up with something to do. I don't remember how much college he had completed but he was several years older than I was. He regularly received his home town weekly paper – The Liberty Center Gazette, it's masthead motto was "*The only newspaper in Ohio that gives a damn about Liberty Center, Ohio*". He was a very good bombardier; constantly scoring high on our practice runs in the Arizona desert. Mainly, Bob loved the girls. He fell in love at a moment's notice – several times a week. I may tell more about this later – maybe.

Harold E. McGlothlen – Engineer/Waist Gunner A former airplane mechanic from Des Moines, Mac was cheerful, open and a first class mechanic. As engineer, he was responsible for fixing, adjusting and repairing the airplane when we were away from a maintenance base as well as for managing a number of in-flight systems like fuel transfer while we were in the air.

Frank A. Radics – Radio Operator/Waist Gunner Frank was a wiry, pleasant guy from South Bend, Indiana, full of street smarts. In addition to short range voice radios to communicate with other planes we had a long-range set to communicate with our base. Those messages were sent and received in Morse code and Frank handled all this traffic. When not occupied with radio duties he manned the starboard waist gun

Louis Pappas, Jr. – Top Turret Gunner A tall gentle guy from Boston, Lou always had a big smile for everybody.

John M. Wells – Nose Turret Gunner Wells had roots in Florida and New Jersey. He

Chapter 3 – The Crew is Formed

was energetic and always willing to pitch in.

Roland K. Daniels – Tail Turret Gunner Keith, another farm boy, came from Kansas. The quiet one on the crew, he was pleasant, willing and always interested in everything new we encountered.

Walter J. Simmons – Ball Turret Gunner Walt came from a sheep ranching family in California: shy but eager, he got along well with everybody.

Joseph W. Shuster – Copilot Yes, I was there too.

Operational Training – Davis-Monthan Field, Tucson, Arizona, February and March, 1944

Our orders said we were going to Tucson. None of us knew where or what kind of a place it was. Someone remembered seeing a movie called "Tucson" and suggested it was some kind of cowboy town. That was the extent of our collective sophistication. The next day we boarded a troop train and arrived in Tucson early one February morning. As I got off the train I was enchanted with the mission style buildings, beautiful mountains, flowers blooming everywhere, but mostly by the air. It had a quality I can only describe as soft. Remember, we had come from Utah where it was still the middle of winter but here spring was in full bloom. I vowed that whatever happened, some day I would go back to Tucson.

Here's where we had our first contact with the B-24. Boy, how big it seemed after flying those little trainers. We had two months to learn how to handle this ship and to work effectively as a crew well enough to deal with the rigors of combat flying.

For Ned and me, the first objective was to learn to fly the monster. Every airplane has its own peculiar characteristics and you learn to fly it by constant practice of all possible maneuvers. For example, in the trainers we flew, the pilot's seat was back far enough so you had the nose and most of the wings within your forward field of view. In the B-24, the wings and even the engine nacelles were aft of the flight deck which made it difficult just to keep the plane level. The pilots' heads were 14 feet above the ground, making it hard to judge how close you were to the ground when landing. Someone said it was like trying to fly a house while sitting on the roof of the front porch. We were accustomed to trainers designed to land at 30 to 50 mph; the B-24 approach speed was 130 mph and it came over the fence at 110 mph.

Then there was all the equipment to learn. Combat planes are designed with redundant systems. That means there is more than one way to do something. For example, the landing gear was raised and lowered by hydraulic pressure provided by an electric pump, actuated by a lever in the cockpit. But in case that system was shot up, you could move the gear with a hand pump providing the hydraulic pressure. If the hydraulic pressure was lost the gear could still be moved by a hand crank pulling a steel cable.

The bombardier, navigator and gunners also had to learn their complicated equipment. Becoming proficient on every aspect of the airplane and its equipment was essential.

Chapter 3 – The Crew is Formed

Actually, Ned and I found the B-24 fairly easy to fly. It was slow and sluggish as big planes are, but that stability was an asset. Once you learned to allow for the slower response and anticipate what she was going to do, she wasn't too difficult to handle. However, the B-24 control systems were all mechanical, with no boosters like power steering on a truck. You really had to muscle that beast around. But both Ned and I were fairly big and strong, which was an asset. Even so, in coping with rough weather or in performing drastic maneuvers, she was more than one man could handle. Then we would both work the controls at the same time, a task requiring a sensitive collaboration between us.

We spent many hours practice bombing on the desert range. Bob was skilled in the use of the Norden bombsight. The trick was to be able to hold the target in the center of the cross-hairs by the sensitive and steady rolling of two knobs. The bombsight then calculated the speed of closure with the target and the amount of drift (sideways). Then considering the altitude and the trajectory of the given bomb to be dropped, the bombsight itself released the bomb at the appropriate moment. This required a fine touch by the bombardier and a steady platform, meaning Ned and I had to maintain a constant speed, altitude and direction throughout the bomb run. Coping with the extreme thermals encountered in desert flying would leave us sweating after a hour on the practice range.



Ned, Joe, Don & Bob
Modeling the diversity of uniforms available to
Air Force officers in WW-II

We had gunnery practice as well. It was mostly air-to air, that is shooting at targets towed (far!) behind another plane. But the air-to-ground practice was the most fun. A dummy airfield had been built on the salt flats near Winslow, Arizona with buildings and airplanes made out of wood framing covered with burlap. It was a real kick to roar in over the "airport" at 300 MPH and 20 feet off the ground, hearing and feeling the thumping of our ten .50

caliber machine guns and watching the tracers slam into the targets and churn up clouds of salt dust. Fortunately, we never had to do this in combat, but it was fun at Winslow because there was nobody shooting back at us.

We also had a few long distance flights for Don to hone his navigation skills. I remember one long night trip from Tucson to Los Angeles and back by way of San Francisco.

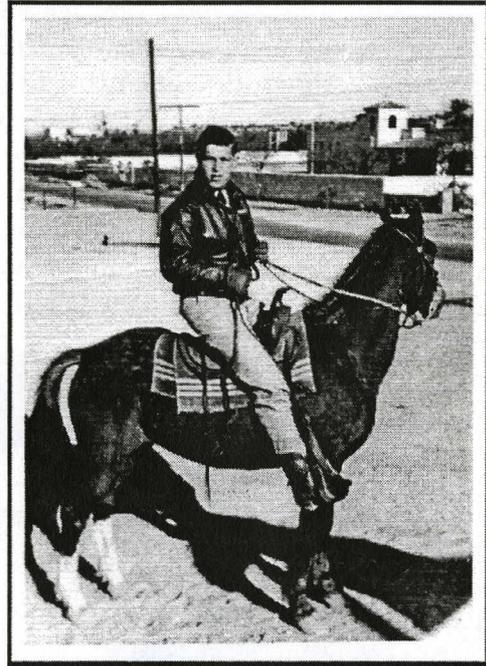
We were a very good crew. Each man was competent in his required tasks and we got along well with each other. Ned was an excellent commander; never bossy but we all knew from his example that we were expected to perform at the highest level. We were

Chapter 3 – The Crew is Formed

proud of our crew and every man did his best.

So much for the training. Tucson was a happy playground for young airmen. The weather was wonderful and the town was full of new things to see and do. We arrived on a Friday and after we had settled in our barracks, Bob announced that he had been told that to find some girls, all that was needed was a call to one of the fraternity houses at the University of Arizona. Since most of the men students were in the service, the fraternity houses were being used as women's' dorms. We decided to go horseback riding and he volunteered to arrange it. He called the Sigma Chi house and in short order found three girls to go riding with us the next morning.

Don hadn't yet joined us and Ned wasn't interested in meeting girls so I went with Bob and Mike Voytish, a copilot on another crew, to pick up the girls. We went to Colonel Beasley's stable on River Road in the Tucson foothills. Beasley was a crusty old British cavalry officer who had broken his neck playing polo. He bought range horses and trained them for livery. One of his new horses was proving difficult to handle and I volunteered to try to calm him down. "Little Red" was a feisty mount but I soon found he behaved beautifully if handled gently. I have always had soft hands with a horse so we got on very well. The Colonel was pleased and always saved Little Red for me. It was a beautiful place to ride. The trails wandered through sandy foothills covered with blooming cactus and there were plenty of open flat areas where we could really let them run.



On Little Red

For the two months we were in Tucson, Bob, Mike and I spent every weekend partying with the girls from Sigma Chi house. (Kids: I hadn't met your mother yet!) Bob got pretty serious with a nice girl named Marge and Mike's relationship with Patty deepened to the point that he married her before we left. The wedding was in a lovely Episcopal church, St. Phillips in the Hills, on River Road, very near our riding trails. I met several girls but mostly dated Rusty, who was from Arizona. Most of our dates involved riding, dancing and picnicking in Sabino Canyon, a park up in the mountains. We enjoyed Tucson's big February bash, *La Fiesta de Los Vaqueros*. It's a week-long celebration with parades, rodeos, dances and lots of parties.

The thrill of flying a new airplane, the wonderful weather, plenty of horseback riding and lots of parties combined to make Tucson this country boy's best duty station.

Chapter 4

Flying the Atlantic

On April 13, 1944, we went to Topeka, Kansas to pick up our very own B-24. I don't remember much about Topeka, though we did go to town once or twice. We spent three weeks checking out the airplane and learning its special features, since it was a later model than those we flew in Tucson. We were also fitted out with a complete set of combat flight clothing and gear. For the first time in many months, we were not students but crewmen, with our own airplane, responsible for preparing it and ourselves for the first leg of a common adventure – a trip across the Atlantic Ocean. We had become a crew and we felt like it.



Crew #2836

Bureau, Leathers, Fischer, Shuster

Wells, Simmons, McGlothlin, Radics, Pappas, Daniels

Chapter 4 – Flying the Atlantic

One of the time consuming jobs was calibrating the magnetic compass. This device is affected by each piece of metal near it so it cannot be calibrated until it's installed in a particular plane. The procedure is to park the plane facing due north on a compass rose painted on the ramp. When the engines are revved up to near cruising pitch, you adjust magnets built into the compass box to get it to read north. Then you park facing south and adjust again. This procedure is repeated all around the points of the compass. Then you go back to north and start over, readjusting again and again until you get the least possible error all around the compass. It's a little like balancing a wheel on the car – it will never be perfect but you can minimize the error. The variation factors are written on the face of the compass housing and you must allow for this error when setting a course.

April 29, 1944 We began our trip to Italy with a nine hour flight to Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida. This was our longest flight to date and it was completed with no flight problems and only one navigation 'problem' – Fischer got us 'lost'. Our planned route took us near, but not over, Toone, Tennessee, Ned's home town. Luckily, we got just enough off course to fly right over Ned's house at a very low altitude. You understand, to be certain where we were it was necessary to pass over his house several times, while Ned's family all came out in the yard and waved at us. It was a treat for us as well as for them.

At Morrison Field we faced our first problem as a crew. After landing we learned that John Wells, our nose gunner, had been seriously airsick. He said he had been sick on some earlier flights, but since they had been relatively short, had managed to keep this to himself. For obvious reasons, a crew member who regularly got airsick was taken off flying status and assigned to ground duty. We all liked John and wanted to keep him in the crew. He was a good gunner, energetic, responsible and pleasant. He claimed he was getting better and was sure he would be acclimated by the time we got into combat. This was a tough decision. We didn't want to break in a new gunner at this point and didn't want to disappoint John either. A crewman disabled by airsickness could jeopardize the whole crew. After much discussion, Ned decided, and we all agreed, that he would stay on the crew until we got to our base in Italy but if his sickness didn't stop by that time we would have to replace him.

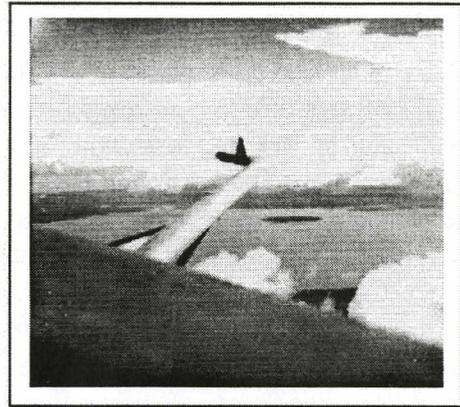
May 2, 1944 After two days of briefing on our transoceanic route, we were ready to head off across the Atlantic. This was when the feeling of being on a big adventure began for me. It was to be our first trip over water and the first time any of us had been outside the USA. Suited up in combat clothes and a Mae West, I diligently strapped on my pistol, feeling I was leaving the civilized world.

A ten hour and forty minute flight took us down over the Bahamas and across Hispaniola to Trinidad. The landing strip at Waller Field was literally cut out of the jungle. I remember looking out the window in our barracks and estimating that I could walk only about ten yards before hitting a solid wall of vegetation – just like the Tarzan movies I had seen. After supper we had a drink in the officer's club, a twenty by twenty foot shack which backed right up to the jungle. I remember hearing all kinds of hoots, howls, snorts and growls during the night.

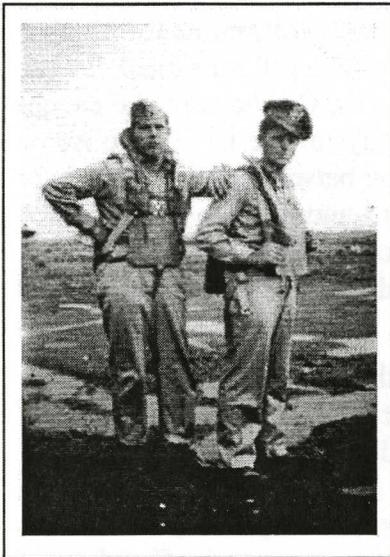
May 3, 1944 Early in the morning we headed south to Brazil, over water until we hit the coast of Venezuela. From there our course paralleled the coast so we had water on

Chapter 4 – Flying the Atlantic

our left and land on the right most of the way. We began our descent just after crossing the very wide, muddy mouth of the Amazon river. Our first sign of any habitation came as we neared our destination. Belem was a beautiful little city of small white houses with shiny red tile roofs. It looked very much like the pictures of Dutch villages I had seen in magazines, except that it was surrounded by deep green jungle. It was so serene and peaceful I felt embarrassed wearing my pistol and took it off as soon as we landed and didn't wear it again until my first mission. We had flown for seven hours and fifteen minutes and landed in the middle of the afternoon, just ahead of the regular daily tropical thunderstorm.



Crossing the Amazon



Joe & Ned at Belem

And it was only a seven and a half
hour flight

The storm was gone, but it had dropped a lot of water and everything was sopping wet. It was here that we began operating as a cohesive crew. Our plane was due for a 25 hour inspection, the responsibility of Mac MacGlothlen, our Engineer and Frank Radics, the Radio Operator/Assistant Engineer. Working alone, they wouldn't finish until bedtime. We had a crew meeting and decided we would all help. The unpaved area where we were parked was a sea of slimy red mud. Mac laid out tasks for each of us and split us into two crews, one to work in and on the plane, the other to stay on the ground. This way we would avoid tracking mud into the plane. Also, the inspection involved crawling around on the wings, a dangerous task with slippery, muddy shoes. I commandeered a small caterpillar tractor and loaded everybody on board. Even Jeeps couldn't move in that mud. I drove out to the plane and the "inside crew" got on the plane with clean shoes and the "ground guys" got down in the mud. I had the easiest job – driving the tractor. I ran errands, moved the spotlight stanchions when needed and even ferried guys from one wing to the other so they could stay out of the mud. We finished the job in record time, satisfied that we worked well as a crew, and felt very good about it. That experience set the right tone among us and was one of the reasons we never had any intra-crew problems.

May 4, 1944 An uneventful six hour flight over land took us to Natal, in the easternmost point of Brazil. This was a large base with nice barracks and a very fancy officer's club. Since we were to be there two days we settled in for some fun. Ned, Don, Bob and I went to the bar in the club and found a long drinks menu. None of us had any idea what these drinks were so we decided the only thing to do was to start at the top of the list and try them all. I don't remember if we finished the list – all I remember was that we had quite an evening.

Chapter 4 – Flying the Atlantic

May 5, 1944 The whole crew boarded a truck which took us to the most beautiful beach I had ever seen. The shore curved in a gentle arc, ending in an impressive headland two or three miles down the coast, where there was a native village. There was no other habitation or building and, except for a couple of other crews, we were the only people there. We had been warned about sunburn – Natal is just six degrees south of the equator, but we stayed there all day, swimming and playing in the surf. After eating our bag lunches, we discovered wild burros in the dunes. Using a piece of rope we found, we managed to catch one of them and stage our own rodeo. Everybody but Don Fischer took a turn trying to ride him, there was no way we could get Don on that animal. We suffered bumps and scrapes but fortunately no serious injuries. Late in the afternoon a big square-rigged ship came sailing into the cove. We watched until she disappeared around the headland. Another first for me – I had never seen a ship like that before. It made me think of Errol Flynn and all those pirate movies. Later in the afternoon a couple of native men came up from the village selling home-made fruit whiskey in coke bottles plugged with old corks. We bought a couple of bottles and put them into the surf to cool. It didn't taste like much but it did have quite a kick.

Trucks came to take us back to the base in time for supper. We returned to the bar and started working on that list again. Because of an early take-off scheduled for the morning, it wasn't too late when we headed back to the barracks. On the way, we caught another wild burro and this time Fischer decided he was ready to ride it. There was a fence around each of the lawn areas – just a single wire strung between posts a little over waist high. We held the burro while Fischer climbed aboard and as soon as we turned him loose, that burro took off in a straight line for some favorite place of his. Naturally, that straight line cut across a grassy area. He easily ducked under the wire but Fischer couldn't. That wire scraped him right off the burro!

As I got undressed for bed it became painfully evident that I should have paid more heed to the warning about sunburn. When I took off my shirt it felt like my skin came off with it. I went to bed hoping a good night's sleep would ease the burning pain and discomfort in time for our early departure the next morning. But I couldn't sleep because of the pain. At two o'clock in the morning I walked down to sick bay in my underwear. The medic slathered me all over with a thick grease of some sort and offered me a medical excuse to delay our departure until I healed. No way, Jose! This was to be the most exciting and challenging leg of our trip and I wasn't about to put it off. I walked back to the barracks and did manage to get a little sleep in a greasy cot.

May 6, 1944 It was a good thing it was still dark when we went out to the airplane because there was no way I could get into shirt and pants. I climbed into the Jeep wearing only underwear, socks, shoes and my hat! I flew across the Atlantic in that attire, with no parachute, seat belt or Mae West.

We took off just before dawn and climbed into a thin but dense cover of clouds before we got to the coast. We flew on top of that cloud layer all the way across the Atlantic. It took eleven hours to reach the coast of Africa and I didn't see water until just before we landed. Needless to say, it was a pretty boring flight. Bureau and the gunners collected all the blankets and sacked out in the waist area so most of the time Ned, Fischer and I were the only ones working. We had the auto-pilot holding course and altitude and it was hard to stay awake. At one point Ned called Fischer and asked if he was awake. When

Chapter 4 – Flying the Atlantic

Fisher answered in the affirmative, Ned said "It's a good thing because I just woke up and Joe is still sleeping!" After that Fischer kept calling us from time to time and that did the trick.

On this leg we learned that Fischer was an ace navigator. In our training so far, almost everybody in the crew had a chance to show what he could do. Every takeoff, flight and landing demonstrated how Ned and I could handle the plane. Many hours on the bombing range convinced us Bob was a capable bombardier. We had been through air-to-air and air-to-ground gunnery exercises so we knew our guys could shoot. But up until now, Don hadn't had much chance to demonstrate his skill as a navigator.

All of our cross country flying had been done on established airways marked with radio ranges and other navigational aids. Even the trip from Florida to Trinidad was fairly easy with good weather and plenty of gas. But flying across the Atlantic was another matter. There were no radio aids, the meteorological data on wind speed and direction was spotty at best and, in daylight, noon is the only time you can get a useful celestial reading by shooting the sun. On top of that, we didn't have much extra fuel to spend trying to find a bit of earth on which to land. This was to be Don's first real showcase for his navigational skill, and everybody on the crew knew we were in his hands.

He did his pre-flight planning well and before takeoff gave us an initial heading for Dakar (then French West Africa). After three hours in the air, he made a minor change in the heading. After about nine hours out, he made another correction. For over ten hours Ned and I had absolutely no idea where we were. We couldn't even see the water for an indication of whether we were drifting north or south. Finally, about twenty minutes before we were to arrive, Don told us to maintain our heading and start letting down into the clouds. Which we did. What else could we do? After about ten minutes penetrating the cloud bank we broke into the clear. And what should we see straight ahead of us but the Dakar airport! That's when we knew we had a first class navigator on our crew.

Dakar had an atmosphere different from anything I had ever known. We taxied behind a guide Jeep to a parking slot in blistering heat. Oh yes, by the time we landed, that grease had taken all the sting out my sunburn and I was in full uniform when I left the plane. Getting out I ran smack into a Senegalese soldier (one of the guard detail), well over six feet tall, black as the proverbial ace of spades, decked out in a bright blue tunic, with baggy red trousers, a sword, a rifle, a tall red fez, gold braid everywhere, all topped with two bandoleers of ammunition and sporting a broad smile with teeth so white they would light up a coal mine. As we exchanged salutes I felt I had landed smack in the middle of an African operetta!

After such a long flight we had a quick supper and collapsed in our bunks. No party tonight. Our barracks was a single story affair with one row of cots down each side and a screen door at each end. Soon we heard a sound like a parade approaching. Along with the sound of marching feet there was a rhythmic chanting in a language we did not understand, all accompanied by a kind of hissing sound. Before long, the screen door at one end of the barracks burst open and in marched a Senegalese sergeant, attired like the one who met our plane, followed by ten privates, all chanting and marching in single file. Each private was armed with a spray gun, held across the chest, with half pointing their

Chapter 4 – Flying the Atlantic

spray to the left, the other half to the right. The pumping of their spray guns in rhythm with their marching and chanting was the hissing sound we had heard. This was the mosquito control squad and we gave them a big hand as they marched down the length of our barracks. Malaria was a big problem; we took Atabrine tablets every day; there was no immunization then.

May 7, 1944 It was an easy seven hour flight across the Sahara to the Moroccan resort city of Marrakech in the shadow of the Atlas mountains. We were billeted in a French Foreign Legion fort. Egads! I've gone from Tarzan to the Sea Witch to an African Operetta to Beau Geste in just a few days!

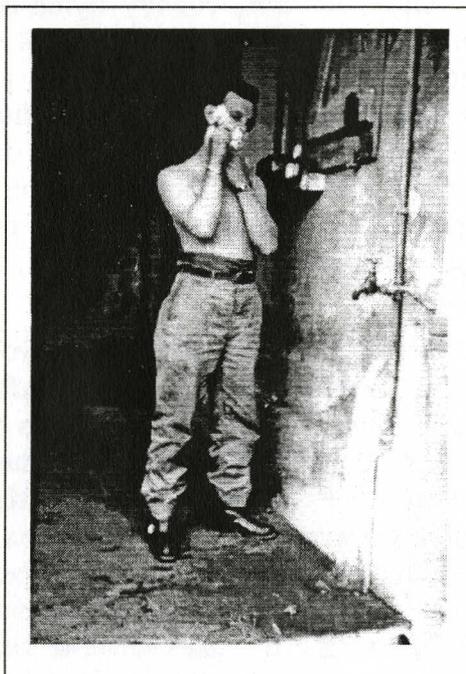
The barracks was made of cut stone, and divided into plain rooms big enough for four cots. While the rest of us were unpacking Ned picked up his toilet case and headed for the washroom. The next thing we heard was a stifled laughter coming down the hall. It was Ned, laughing so hard he couldn't speak. He beckoned us to follow and we discovered a most unique washroom.

A few cold water faucets ran across one wall, a row of shower heads (open, no stalls) lined along the other wall. A long open urinal occupied the end of the room, along with the very unique contraption which was the cause of Ned's laughter. It was a shallow basin in the floor with sides about five inches high and a drain hole in the center. Raised pads the shape of a footprint flanked the drain on each side. A small water tank was mounted on the wall above, complete with a pull-chain and a pipe to carry the water into the basin. In short, a squatting crapper.

I had read about these structures but had never seen one. Bob decided to demonstrate the proper use of this device, which he did quite successfully, up to a point. Being somewhat unfamiliar with it's workings, he pulled the chain a little prematurely. We all had a good laugh as he stood there on the pads, pants still down around his knees while a torrent of water swirled around his boots!

We stayed in Marrakech three nights and went into the city both days. I had read about Marrakech as a favorite vacation spot and was anxious to see it. We were briefed on local customs and given a list of rules designed to keep us out of trouble. The number one rule was "Don't, under any circumstances, go into the Medina". This was the old walled city, called Casbah in other Arab places. No problem. We had seen enough Pepe le Moko movies to understand the importance of that rule.

Bob, Ned and I wanted to ride Arabian horses and I wanted to buy one of those small daggers that Arabs always wore in the movies. The trucks dropped us off in a big square right next to the main gate into Medina. We were immediately surrounded by a crowd of

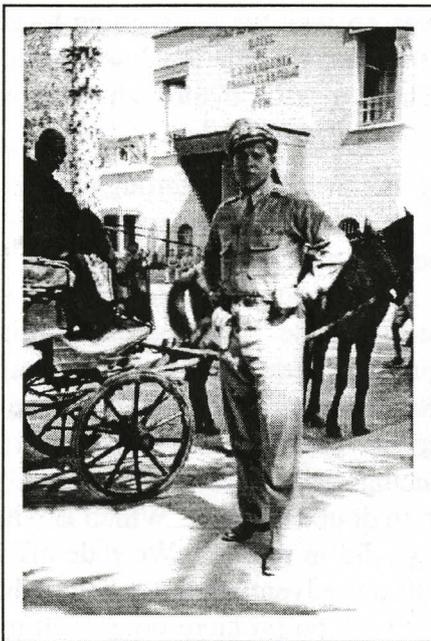


Bob in our Foreign Legion quarters in Marrakech

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street vendors with all sorts of articles and services to sell. Among them was a young man with just the kind of dagger I was seeking. He assured me it was a real antique, full of dents and scratches, made just the day before by his uncle Hassim, and because of his admiration for brave American airmen, he would sell it to me for the magnificent price of only 29 dollars. The price was quoted in francs, but I remember the value in US dollars. I started my bargaining with the expected show of indifference and he started his pitch in earnest. To no avail; I refused his best offer and walked away. After all, I had two whole days to buy a knife; there was no reason to buy the first one offered.

We walked several blocks into the center of the new town and browsed through the shops. Guess who I met? Yes, the same guy with the knife. So we started anew, me insulting his father's camels and he disparaging our airplanes. Another break-off; no deal.



Hotel el Mamouin

We headed for the hotel El Mamouin which, I had read, was Churchill's favorite desert vacation spot. It was really beautiful, with a marbled foyer and a lounge with palm trees and tile-topped iron tables surrounded by rattan chairs to provide guests a respite from the suffocating heat outside. We sat. I had read the favorite drink in this setting was vermouth cassis so that was what I ordered when the pantalooned waiter came, not having the faintest idea what it was. It was cool and sweet and I enjoyed it. Through the hotel concierge, we met a French Army Captain who agreed to provide us with pure-bred desert Arabians and lead us on a tour of the city the next morning. Guess who we met as we left the hotel? Yes, the knife vendor. We started haggling again, but even an extended session produced no deal.

The next morning, the French Captain showed up on schedule with some fine looking Arabians. I had never seen an Arabian horse before so they looked great to me. The Captain spoke no English and had the typical Gallic intolerance for non-Frenchmen, but Bob had studied French in school so we got along well enough.

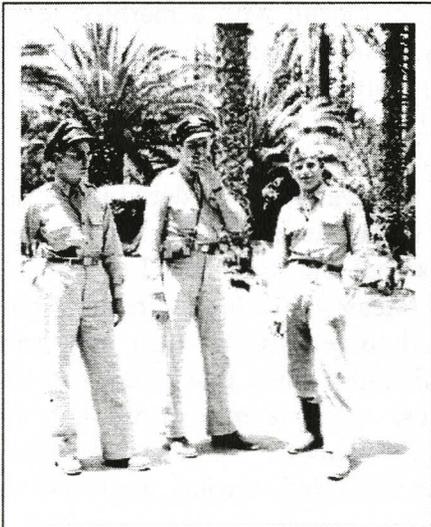
We started riding down a road which ran along the wall of the old city. I was pleased with my horse; he moved smoothly and with great spirit and responded well enough to my way of riding. We had a pleasant ride along the wall until we reached a gate on the far side of the old city. Here, the Captain turned through the gate and we all raised a shout for him to stop.

We tried to explain to the Captain that we couldn't go into the Medina. He railed against such an unreasonable and idiotic rule and Bob's most heroic arguments in high school French were inadequate to convince him otherwise. He simply uttered some unintelligible expression and took off into the Medina. What were we to do? We didn't know the way back to the hotel; we had to follow him. Besides, he said he wanted to

show us the sultan's magnificent garden. So we followed him through the forbidden gate.

Well, the sultan's "magnificent garden" looked like a rundown apple orchard, but the trip was exciting all the same. We saw nothing but robed and hooded swarthy men and we just knew they all carried long, sharp knives under those robes. None of them looked very friendly either. At one point I really was concerned. We headed down a street barely six feet wide, walled on both sides. Men were sitting on the ground with their legs sticking out into the middle of the street. And they didn't move an inch as we approached. There I was, in a place I wasn't supposed to be, riding a horse I didn't know, prancing in a slalom around the outstretched feet of swarthy brigands just waiting for an excuse to carve me to bits.

We got through that obstacle course only to run into another hazard. Coming towards us was a very grim looking native herding a flock of sheep extending from wall to wall. Now I knew we were in trouble. I saw clearly there was no way we were going to get through that flock of sheep without trampling one of them. But we did. My horse picked up his feet nicely and we made it through with our heads still firmly attached to our bodies.



Bob, Don & Ned
in Marrakech

After traversing the whole city through narrow alleys and cramped streets the road opened up into a plaza and the Captain turned toward an opening in the wall. We were at the main gate which seemed so forbidding from the other side. Imagine the surprise of the MPs stationed outside to prevent unwary soldiers from entering such a dangerous area when a French Army Captain and three US Air Corps officers came prancing out of the forbidden city. What to do? When in doubt – salute. Which is what they did and what we did in return. We rode off to the hotel, elated with our adventure and relieved that we had completed it with no problem other than our failure to impress "Mon Capitan" with our horsemanship.

And who was there waiting? Yes, the knife vendor. We had another round of vigorous bargaining but still no deal.

We spent the rest of the day doing the things a tourist does in Marrakech. I bought a monkey. A cute little fellow I kept that night but gave away to one of the ground crew before we took off the next morning.

Finally, just as I was about to board the truck for the ride back to the base, my knife vendor appeared again. With one foot on the step to get into the truck I made my final offer – 50 cents. Being a true negotiator, he recognized a final offer when he saw it and with much moaning and groaning, he agreed. Not bad bargaining! Two days to go from twenty-nine dollars to fifty cents? And I think he had as much fun as I did.

May 10, 1944 A six hour flight up the ridge of the Atlas Mountains across Morocco and Algeria brought us to the airbase at Tunis where we got our first sight of the

Chapter 4 – Flying the Atlantic

Mediterranean. We stayed one night and I have absolutely no memory of Tunis. In fact, I had completely forgotten that we stopped there but my log book shows that we did. So much for the lasting impression made by the capital of Hannibal's empire.

May 11, 1944 This leg of the trip I do remember. It took only three hours and 25 minutes to go from Africa, across Sicily (flying right over Mt. Etna) then across the Strait of Messina and up the toe of Italy to a base at Gioia del Colle, 25 miles south of the Adriatic port of Bari. After 57 hours and twenty minutes of flying we finally completed our trip from Topeka to Italy. We stayed in tents that night and ate our meals out of mess kits out in the open air.

The Fifteenth Air Force officially reached its full strength of 21 bomb groups and six fighter groups on May 10th, the day before we arrived in Italy. We were assigned to the 456th Bomb Group in the 304th Wing. The Group's Commander was Colonel Tom Steed and our nickname was "Steed's Flying Colts".

Composition of the 15th Air Force on May 10, 1944:

5th Wing (B-17) 6 Heavy Bomb Groups: 2nd, 97th, 99th, 301st, 463rd, 483rd.

55th Wing (B-24) 4 Heavy Bomb Groups: 460th, 464th, 465th, 485th.

304th Wing (B-24) 4 Heavy Bomb Groups: 454th, 455th, 456th, 459th.

49th Wing (B-24) 4 Heavy Bomb Groups: 451st, 461st, 484th.

47th Wing (B-24) 4 Heavy Bomb Groups: 98th, 376th, 449th, 450th.

Fighter Units (P-47, P-52 & P-38) 6 Groups: 52nd, 332nd, 325th, 82, 14th, 1st.

Except for the four groups of the 47th Wing which were located in the heel of the Italian "boot" near Taranto, the Bomb groups were within 40 miles of the city of Foggia. All but one of the fighter groups were located north of the bomber bases. See Appendix B for the location of each group.

May 12, 1944 We were disappointed when our shiny new airplane was taken from us. We had assumed that we would be flying it on every mission and had begun discussing a name for it. In the beginning of the campaign, it had been practice for each crew to keep its own plane but it was soon discovered that better utilization resulted from pooling the planes and assigning them to crews on a mission by mission basis. We spent the day unloading the plane and waiting for transportation to our own base but it never came.

May 13, 1944 Late in the afternoon our squadron sent a plane down to ferry us the 70 miles to our base near the town of Stornara. We were assigned to a tent and spent the evening unpacking and getting settled.

For the next week we were involved in briefings on local procedures. We flew a number of training flights, becoming familiar with the topography around our base and practicing formation flying. I flew my first mission on May 23, 1944. It was a short one

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to northern Italy. We encountered scattered flak but no enemy fighters. The target was clouded over so we didn't drop our bombs. I don't remember being scared but it was certainly exciting being on our first mission and we were under a great deal of pressure to avoid making an embarrassing mistake. After landing, we all felt like we had accomplished something important. Just after we landed, two of our planes collided in the air and crashed on and near the field. Nineteen of the twenty crew members were killed; the survivor suffered burns and a broken back. So much for play acting in adventure movies – this was the real thing.

Later I'll describe a typical mission. While I have both my official flight record and my personal log book, I didn't keep a diary so I won't attempt a report on each mission. If you're interested, details of each mission can be found in the Group's history book¹ and in Bob Capp's excellent book² about his time in the 456th. My missions are listed on the next page.

I need to tie up one loose end. John Wells kept getting sick, on and off, throughout our whole trip to Italy. But he was never sick on a mission!

¹ Fred H. Riley, 456th Bomb Group – Steed's Flying Colts (Paducah, Ky: Turner Publishing Company, 1994)

² Robert S. Capps, Col. USAF Ret., Flying Colt – Liberator Pilot in Italy (Alexandria VA; Manor House Publications, 1977)

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Missions Flown by J. W. Shuster
456th Bomb Group – 15th Air Force

NBR	Date	Type	Location	Country	Target	Credit
51	5-23-44	*	Marino	Italy	Troop Concentration	1
53	5-25-44	*	Piacenza	Italy	Airdrome	2
55	5-27-44	*	Montpellier	France	Airdrome	3
56	5-28-44	*	Genoa	Italy	Harbor Installation	4
59	5-30-44	**	Wels	Austria	Airdrome	6
61	6-2-44	**	Miskolc	Hungary	Marshalling Yard	8
63	6-6-44	**	Brasov	Rumania	Marshalling Yard	10
64	6-7-44	*	Savona	Italy	Marshalling Yard	11
67	6-11-44	**	Giurgiu Quay	Rumania	Docks & Harbor	13
69	6-16-44	**	Vienna/Winterhafen	Austria	Refinery	15
71	6-23-44	*	Nis	Yugoslavia	Marshalling Yard	16
72	6-24-44	*	Craiova	Rumania	Marshalling Yard	17
74	6-26-44	**	Moosbierbaum	Austria	Refinery	19
75	6-28-44	*	Karlova	Bulgaria	Airdrome	20
77	7-2-44	**	Budapest	Hungary	Refinery	22
79	7-6-44	*	Trieste	Italy	Refinery	23
80	7-7-44	**	Odertal	Czechoslovakia	Refinery	25
84	7-15-44	*	Ploesti	Rumania	Refinery	26
88	7-21-44	**	BruX	Czechoslovakia	Refinery	28
90	7-25-44	**	Linz	Austria	Tank Factory	30
91	7-27-44	*	Budapest	Hungary	Tank Factory	31
97	8-12-44	*	So. France (?)	France	Gun Positions	32
98	8-13-44	*	Orange	France	Railroad Bridge	33
100	8-15-44	*	Beach #264B	France	Troop Concentration	34
109	8-27-44	**	Blechammer	Germany	Refinery	36
112	9-1-44	*	Debreczen	Hungary	Marshalling Yard	37
115	9-4-44	*	Casarsa	Italy	Bridge	38
121	9-15-44	*	Athens	Greece	Airdrome	39
128	10-4-44	**	Munich/West	Germany	Marshalling Yard	41
130	10-7-44	**	Vienna/Winterhafen	Austria	Refinery	43
134	10-12-44	*	Bologna	Italy	Munitions Factory	44
135	10-13-44	**	Blechammer	Germany	Refinery	46
138	10-16-44	**	Steyr	Austria	Daimler Factory	48
140	10-20-44	**	Munich/Bad Aibling	Germany	Airdrome	50

Notes: * denotes single mission credit

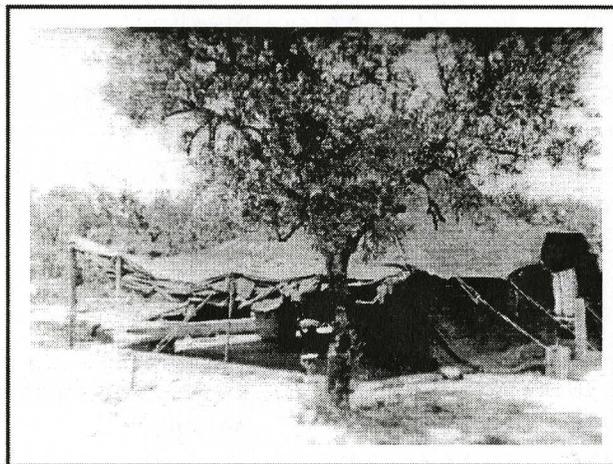
** denotes double mission credit

Chapter 5

Life at a Bomber Base

The 456th Bomb Group (Heavy) was comprised of four squadrons, each with 20 to 30 crews and 62 B-24 Liberators. The base was cut out of an olive grove, near the little town of Stornara and about 30 miles south of Foggia, Italy.¹ The four squadron living areas were grouped around the single 4,800 foot runway and the headquarters complex was on a hill east of the runway.

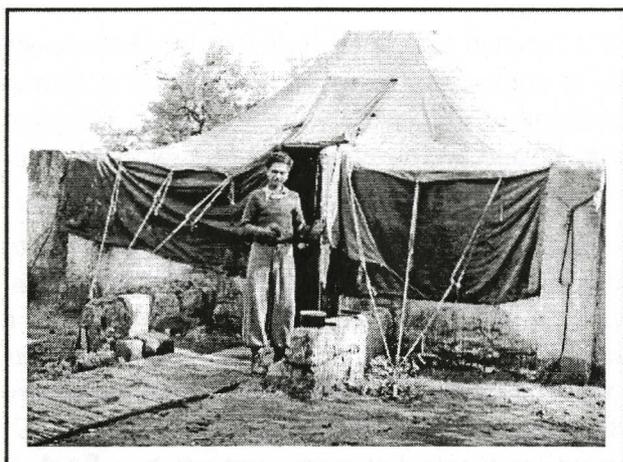
When we arrived on May 11, 1944, we were assigned to the 747th squadron. Ned, Don, Bob and I were given a 9' X 9' pyramidal tent (no door, dirt floor) to pitch among the olive trees. The only other facilities were latrines and two mess tents (officers and enlisted) where we took our meals. After 3 months we were transferred to the 744th squadron, where the standard GI accommodations had been substantially upgraded. Mess was served in a building, not a tent. The 744 crews had chipped in and hired local labor to build a mess building and an officer's club. Individual crews contracted for stone walls built to the dimensions of a standard tent. The Italians quarry a soft tuft stone, harder than talc but softer than marble. It isn't very good for permanent buildings, but it was cheap and easily cut – just the right material for buildings that were not expected to last very long.



Our first tent

¹ We shared the field with an RAF contingent of Halifax bombers who flew single missions at night in the RAF style. We had little contact with them because of our conflicting schedules.

Pitching the tent on top of these solid walls produced a comfortable structure with a proper door, wood floor and much more headroom under the raised tent. When we transferred to the 747th, we inherited one of these upgraded tents. It even had an alcove for a stove.



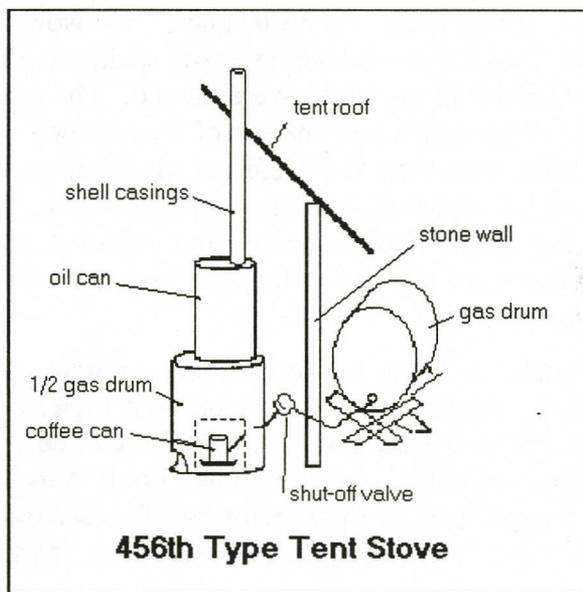
Tonio in front of our manor house

Unfortunately, the crew who contracted for the walls got shot down before they could build the stove. There was plenty of room for a central table along with our cots and footlockers. I even had a large solid wooden box on legs to use as a desk. I fashioned a hidden lock for the hinged lid so that it could be raised only after poking a small nail through a special hole. Without knowing where to look, it was hard even to find the hole. For security reasons,

we all kept our valuables in this box when we were away.

This tent was a big improvement over our digs in the 747th. Our first "home improvement project" was to build a stove, using a design that had been worked out by crews ahead of us. The bottom half of a 50 gallon fuel drum, turned upside down, formed the main heating chamber. A small door was cut in the bottom to provide draft and access for lighting and a six inch hole was cut in the top of the drum to allow smoke to escape. A five gallon oil drum with the bottom cut out was welded over this hole to provide more area for radiation. Finally, a chimney was fashioned by joining lengths of steel casings which had been used by the Germans as containers for anti-aircraft ammunition. This structure rested on a bed of gravel surrounded by a low wall of stone.

Our fuel was 80 octane gasoline. While gasoline was severely rationed in the states, we had an excess of 80 octane gas in Italy. Resting on a sawhorse outside the tent wall was another 50 gallon drum, fitted with a length of aluminum tubing from the hydraulic system of a wrecked B-24. This tubing, which had a shut-off valve to regulate gas flow, ran through the wall and down to the gravel bed of our stove. A large coffee can punched full of holes sat in the dish from a mess-kit filled with clay mixed air with the gas and contained the flames. On a really cold morning we could get the big drum and the 5 gallon radiator red hot in less than two minutes. Many tents



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had stoves of this same basic design and they really worked quite well. It's remarkable that there were no tent fires all the time I was there: with stoves like that, it's really a wonder we didn't burn the whole camp down once a week.

We were actually comfortable there. We listened to Armed Forces Radio broadcasts on Don's portable radio and we had access to books from the small library up at Group Headquarters. We had a squadron shower made of droppable wing fuel tanks mounted on an overhead trellis. The water was solar heated and gravity fed but it worked well, except that on cloudy days all you could get was a cold shower.

And we had a houseboy. Entry to the base was restricted, but passes were given to local vendors and workmen, including houseboys for the crews who wanted to hire them. Our first boy was Pasquale, smart, enterprising and short – almost dwarf-like due to a back deformity. He cleaned the tent, made our beds, shined our shoes and ran errands as needed. He was honest and efficient and we liked him. We paid him a negotiated wage in occupation currency and tipped him with cigarettes, soap and other small articles. All the houseboys were fluent in several European languages but most were weak in English since they were limited to what they learned on the job. Pasquale was unique in that he spoke excellent English. When he left us to undertake some other business, we hired Tonio, who spoke German, Greek and Spanish as well as Italian, but little English. We managed to get by with a combination of tongues. I made do by adapting my four years of high school Latin to contemporary Italian, Bob was fairly good in French and Don was very fluent in German. Tonio's knowledge of German was sound, but he spoke it with a decidedly Italian accent. Don, who came from a German-speaking family in Michigan, got ticked off when Tonio told him he spoke German with a funny accent!

There was an older man allowed in the camp who did a brisk business peddling fresh fruits and vegetables. He spoke very little English but understood my Latin well enough to get along in simple trade conversations. He brought us tomatoes, apricots, and cucumbers which we paid for cigarettes, soap or candy bars. Since we had no fresh food in the mess, we savored these items and ate them like candy. He also took our dirty clothes to a village lady to launder. He would return the next day with the clothes all cleaned, ironed and folded; even my socks were ironed. Any missing buttons were sewed on and holes in my socks were darned. The going rate for a week's load of wash was 2 packs of cigarettes and one bar of soap, which we got from supply. Cigarettes, soap, and chocolate bars were the preferred media of exchange in dealing with the Italians. We had no US currency, only occupation dollars. The Italian lira was completely worthless and they didn't like the occupation currency, so most trading was done with cigarettes. We each were allowed to buy one carton a week and even non-smokers bought them to use for exchange.

I hate to burst any impression of intrepid airmen living an exciting, hectic and romantic existence, but the truth is our biggest problem was boredom. On the days we didn't fly a mission there was very little to do except for training flights or an occasional squadron meeting. In six months, I only flew 34 missions (we got double credit for the long, tough ones so I got credit for 50 missions). That's like a job where you only go to work 5 or 10 days out of each month. Yes, it varied – see chart on the next page.

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We had occasional movies in the evening but I don't remember going to many of them. I do remember practicing throwing our combat knives at targets. The corrugated cardboard tubes that bombs were shipped in made the best targets.

Another absorbing activity was shooting salamanders with the Colt .45. An eight foot deep drainage ditch running through our area contained a mass of salamanders in the weeds at the bottom. We threw rocks into the weeds and shot at the salamanders when they scampered up

the opposite side of the ditch. I got pretty handy with the .45 that way. It wasn't really a good test of marksmanship because if you hit anywhere within a foot or two of the salamander the heavy .45 slug threw up enough sand and broken rock to kill him.

The food in the mess was ample but standard GI fare. Everything came out of a can; no fresh fruits, eggs or vegetables. The milk was mixed from powder and the butter had some kind of additive to prevent spoilage and was the consistency of axle grease. Once I managed to get a fresh egg, a small onion and a couple of potatoes from our local supplier. I borrowed a frying pan and 'butter' from the kitchen, laid up a few stones outside my tent and built a campfire. I cooked myself a feast of home-fried potatoes like my grandfather used to make for me for breakfast. When the smell of frying onions and potatoes went through the camp, I had about twenty guys come around to investigate. With that many men and only one egg there was no question of sharing so they had to be content with enjoying the aroma.

Beer was a rare and special commodity. A shipment came in every 4 or 6 weeks and we usually got only two cans each. There was always a fierce round of trading on beer days when the non-drinkers cleaned up from those of us who liked our beer.

Beer cans in those days didn't have easy opening tops; they were just like soup cans. And for some reason, beer can openers were scarce as hen's teeth. The rudimentary technique was to hold your combat dagger in one hand with the point on the top of the can and lightly but sharply pound the hilt of the dagger with your other fist. This easy method produced only one hole and the beer would fizz up upon impact, resulting in a loss of a good deal of beer. You lost even more if the can tipped over. Experienced beer drinkers could hold the can in one hand and the dagger in the other and with two quick stabs make two holes, one near each edge of the lid. With two holes, the pressure was released without fizzing away any of the beer. This was a much better method but it was not without risk. It took a bit of practice to make two successful stabs. If you didn't get two clean punctures, properly spaced, you lost a lot of beer. If you went too deep on the first stab the knife would stick in the lid and you lost even more. Worst of all, if you missed the can entirely, you suffered a nasty dagger wound in your thumb or finger. It was not uncommon to see bandaged left hands on beer days.

Cooling the beer was a real challenge. We had no refrigerators and ice was unavailable. We tried covering the cans with wet cloths and fanning to cool it by

	Missions Flown:		
	By the Group	By JWS	Pct. by JWS
May '44	19	5	26%
June '44	17	9	53%
July '44	18	7	39%
Aug '44	19	4	21%
Sept '44	17	3	18%
Oct '44	16	6	38%
Total	106	34	32%

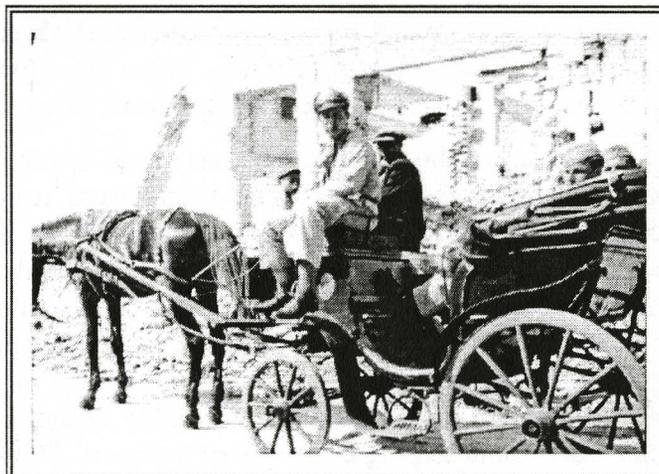
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evaporation; this was very time consuming and not very effective. Usually, we just drank it warm. One hot day we put all our beer cans in a 50 gallon gas drum filled with gasoline and stuck an air compressor hose down to the bottom of the drum. The blasting air rapidly evaporated the gasoline and the beer came out quite cold. Unfortunately, a petroleum residue remained on the can, giving the beer an unpalatable smell and an 80 octane after-taste.

Another time, the guy in Group Headquarters in charge of receiving and distributing the beer decided on a radically creative cooling technique. Without telling anyone, he sent the whole shipment on one of the planes going on that day's mission to Munich. After all, the temperature aloft was well below freezing and he reasoned we would all be grateful to get our beer already cold. Sometime before the planes returned the word got out that our beer was 20,000 feet over Germany being shot at by enemy fighters and flak! Most of us headed for the control tower to monitor messages from the returning crews to see if our beer barge had survived the mission but the rest formed a small, determined posse and sought out the man who had put our beer in harms way. They brought him to the tower so he would be readily available for lynching if our beer didn't get back safely. Eventually, the ship came home. It had picked up a fair number of flak holes, but the crew used their own flak vests to cover the beer as best they could, and not a single can was punctured. We all went down to the parked plane and helped unload the beer, which was delightfully cold indeed.

Mail was good. I didn't get much. I didn't have a "girl back home" though a girl I met in Tucson wrote a couple of times. I fondly remember a few letters from Aunt Dot – bless her. My main correspondent was my mother. She wrote regularly and fully. I really anxiously awaited her letters. I think I wrote back faithfully but I probably should be glad there are no statistics available.

We went to the city of Foggia a couple of times. We toured of the once in a horse drawn carriage, driving through areas damaged by bombing, artillery and street fighting. It was not a very pretty city at that time. All we saw of Italy was desolated from years of hardship under Mussolini capped by months of warfare. It seemed their German allies treated them worst of all. When the Germans left they took everything of value they could carry. People told us of soldiers coming into their houses



Touring bomb ruins in Foggia

and taking blankets off the beds and food from the cupboard. Many Italians saw and treated the Americans, not as enemy invaders, but as rescuers who were saving them from the Germans. There were a few occasions when we "went to town". I remember walking into the village of Stornara and having a glass of local wine – Muscatel, is what they termed it. Another time Bob and Ned and I walked out into the countryside and

Chapter 5 – Life at a Bomber Base

struck up a conversation with an Italian farming family. They invited us into the house and served us some wine. One woman of about 40 was a teacher and spoke good English. Through her interpretive skills we carried on a sort of conversation. They were curious about each of us – where we lived, how we came to be pilots, what we felt about the Italians, etc.

Another time we went out to the beach on the Adriatic to play in the surf and sand. We rented a sailboat from a fisherman for a pleasant outing. On the Fourth of July there was a rodeo put on by the American forces and I helped man the chutes for the saddle bronc event. It was funny as hell watching our cowboys trying to rope calves and



Sailing off Manfredonia

goats while riding Italian horses that had never seen a rope before! On July 14th, the anniversary of the founding of the Group we had a big party. Plenty of beer, mule races, a barbecue and a greased pig scramble.

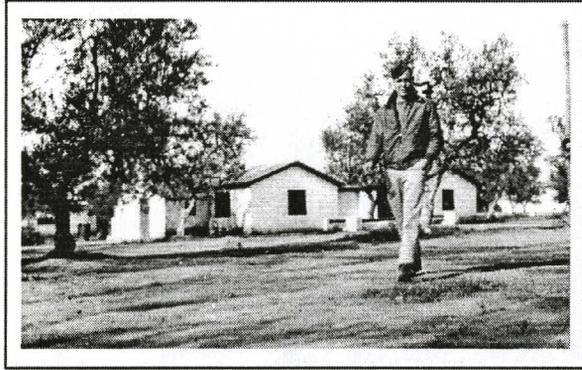
Skeet shooting was a standard sport for pilots. It was supposed to sharpen your eye for aerial gunnery. We had a trap which threw the clays in all directions. However, the only guns available were the sawed-off shotguns issued to MP's. Because the short barrel created a widely spread shot pattern you had to fire as soon as the bird came up to have any chance of scoring. Most of us didn't fare very well.

I had to take my turn censoring outgoing mail. Three or four of us sat around a big table, equipped with black magic markers to strike out anything improper. It was interesting to see what people felt was important to write about. Most letters went through unscathed. Occasionally, someone would mention that we were in Italy, or mention a B-24 and all this had to go. We noticed a number of guys writing the same letter to more than one girl. One fellow wrote to four different girls, proclaiming his undying love to each. We were under strict rules to make only those changes necessary for national security, and were forbidden to make any contact with the writer. Well, one day it happened. This poor fellow wrote to his four girls but put the letter to "Dearest Susie" into the envelope intended to carry his "Dearest Irene" letter. We had a big discussion about what to do and finally decided that the rules required the letters to be sent as we had received them. Maybe it wasn't unintentional; it could have been his way of sending a good bye message. I never did hear what happened.

The squadron Officers Club was a three room stone building. It had a bar, but there wasn't much drinking. The big attraction was the crap games. We had two tables, one for the nickel and dime betters and the big game for the heavy hitters. We had very few things to spend money on so most of us had money to bet. Many guys didn't even cash their paychecks because they were a convenient way to carry 'cash'. Occupation currency

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was all small bills. Craps can be an exciting and absorbing game, with all the odds you have to remember. Most guys played for the recreation although we had a few who were quite avid. The two-table system was convenient. If you hit a streak of bad luck and lost your stake you could transfer to the nickel game and keep on playing until you recouped enough to get back into the big game. I usually played at the big table and did well enough to break even, maybe even win a bit, over the long run.



John Wells in front of the Officers Club

Our planes were parked all around the landing strip. They were guarded during the day and evening by our ground crews. The duty of "Officer of the Guard" was shared by flight officers. During the months I was getting little flying I volunteered for this out of boredom. From sundown to sunup I patrolled the area in a Jeep, checking each parking spot to be sure the guard was not asleep and that there was no problem. From midnight to dawn, the guards were from a Military

Police unit attached to our base. This was a segregated unit, all were black. They were very diligent in their duty and performed very well. We never had any intruders or any problems and it gave me something to do besides shooting craps.

Chapter 6

A TYPICAL WORK DAY

WAKE UP CALL Contrary to romantic conception, I didn't start my workday with the thrilling sounds of the bugler playing reveille but with a sergeant sticking his head in my tent and blowing a police whistle. It wasn't romantic, but it was effective. Even the soundest sleeper was on his feet before the sound died away. Wake up time varied, as did the morning schedule. More time was allowed for briefing on complicated missions; more time was allowed for assembly as the number of airplanes increased. We were usually called at between 4 and 6 AM and a typical schedule might be:

Wake up call	0400
Briefing	0530
Stations	0645 (Crew back at assigned airplane)
Start engines:	
1st Box	0650
2nd Box	0657
3rd Box	0704
4th Box	0711
Taxi start	0700
Takeoff	0710

Breakfast on mission mornings was standard Army C rations. It was usually a quiet affair, with nobody in much of a mood for conviviality. Dressing was done with some care because every item was essential. First, long underwear, then my uniform trousers, shirt, etc. with thick socks under my regular GI boots. Topping this was a one-piece flight suit. A forty-five automatic, a survival knife and dog-tags completed the basic outfit.

In addition, I carried an oxygen mask, a Mae West (life jacket), parachute and my outer flight suit – pants, jacket, helmet, gloves and boots. These were made of heavy leather and fleece-lined. The pants had bibs like a farmer's overalls and the jacket was hip-length. Since they were very warm and severely restricted mobility, I didn't don

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these until just before boarding the airplane for takeoff. With some struggling, we climbed into six-by-six trucks for the ride up to group headquarters where we filed into a big hall for the mission briefing.

BRIEFING The large map of the whole European theater mounted on the wall behind the podium was covered by a curtain until all crews were in the room and the doors locked. All eyes were glued to that map as the Briefing Officer (BO) drew back the curtain. A long piece of red yarn marked the route to the target and return. The group's reaction came immediately in the form of a collective expression – varied depending what the yarn revealed. A long mission against a well-fortified target provoked a low groan, a short trip with minimal flak and fighter opposition might produce a sigh like that made by a good horse when you loosen his cinch after a hard ride.

The BO then explained the mission in great detail, describing each leg of the route to the target, each rendezvous with other groups, the enemy fighter opposition to be encountered, the number and type of anti-aircraft batteries expected and the nature and importance of the target. The route home after the bombing was covered as well, with suggestions for alternate landing and bail-out locations for crews in trouble. There was usually a short report of how the war was going, i.e. what happened yesterday in the Pacific, as well as the European theater. The targets scheduled for the Eighth Air Force (in England) were always covered as our missions were often coordinated to achieve a single strategic objective. The group meteorologist gave a detailed forecast of the weather expected all along the route, both going and coming. The general briefing usually ended with a pep talk by one of the group officers. Separate briefings were then held for pilots, navigators, and bombardiers, where information specific to each group's tasks was covered. Meanwhile, the gunners were trucked to the ships to begin the daily inspection routine and help with the armament. The whole process took from 60 to 90 minutes.

The BO's were tactical (i.e. non-flying) officers from the intelligence section. They were older than we were, mostly Captains and Majors. I really never saw them except at briefings and had very little in common with them. In one sense we were still the students and they were the faculty. Given that relationship, you can understand our reaction to an unconscious switch in the choice of pronouns employed by one of them. He would start with "we". "We will take off at 0700. We will assemble over the base at 3,000 feet. We will join bomber train just after the 459th group at 0738 over Stornara. We will proceed up the Adriatic, reaching 18,000 feet as we cross the coastline east of Trieste and cross the Alps just west of the Matterhorn." Now, here comes the switch. "You will encounter your first fighter opposition as you cross the Swiss border into Germany. You will encounter heavy anti-aircraft fire all the way into and out of the target area. You can expect fighter attacks all along the homeward route until you cross the infantry lines just north of Milan." Then another switch. "We should have good weather all the way down the Italian peninsula and we should arrive back at the base under clear skies by 1500 hours."

I don't know who was first to notice this Freudian speech pattern, but it became quite a topic of conversation among the flight crews. One day a slight titter ran through the room when he used the first "You" in his briefing and another when he switched back to

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"We" on the way home. But he didn't spot this reaction on that day. The next day's briefing produced a more pronounced titter and we could see that he noticed, but didn't understand, its meaning. Finally, on a day when the first "You" produced a hearty and audible groan, he asked "Did I say something wrong?" Well, we knew it was unintentional, and nobody really wanted to hurt the guy, so one of the senior pilots stood up and pointed out his habit, saying, "It's just that we would feel more confident if you were going to be with us, if only in spirit, on the whole mission, not just the easy parts." The poor guy collapsed in a fit of embarrassment. He couldn't believe he had done such a thing until one of colleagues confirmed it. He apologized profusely and we gave him a big round of applause. He never said "We" again.

INSPECTION Briefing over, we piled into our trucks and bounced down to the "hard stand" where our airplane of the day was parked. Our ground crews would have the ship ready to go but Mac always got there early to check a whole list of items as a double precaution. After insuring that Mac's daily inspection had turned up no problems and that the guns were fully loaded it was time to get dressed for work.

CLOTHING AND GEAR Getting dressed for flight was something of a chore. First, crawl up into the cockpit and put the parachute on your seat. Pilots 'chutes were the "back-pack" type and you put them on by sitting on them and then fastening the buckles. Next, climb back down on the ground, take off the forty-five and put on the heavy flight pants, jacket and boots (I kept my combat dagger strapped to my leg inside my boot). Strap the pistol back on and the Mae West on top of that. Clip the oxygen mask to your helmet. Now the only problem is crawling back into the cockpit and squeezing into the seat. Once there, fasten the parachute straps over your chest and between the legs, fasten the two shoulder belts and the lap belt, drape your flak jacket (a canvas bib stuffed with 30 pounds of steel bars) around your neck, plug in your oxygen mask and your headphones, strap on a throat mike and plug it in and you're ready to go to work. We used to say our flight wardrobe was made by "Hart, Schaffner and Bethlehem Steel".

If you ever get to see inside a B-24 cockpit you will be surprised at the small space allocated to the pilots. Well, the clothing we wore was very restrictive and when strapped into the seat our reach was severely limited. Yet it was necessary to reach all the levers, switches and buttons for the operation of the airplane so the cockpit had to be small and confining. It's always a bit of a rush to get ready to start engines on time. We go through the pre-take-off checklist and wait for our turn to move out into take-off position. Meanwhile, the sun is up, the outside temperature is over sixty and I am dressed for twenty below. By the time we get to take-off, my underwear and flight suit are soaking wet and my boots are filled with sweat up to my ankles.

The Liberator had a cabin heater in the cockpit but it was kind of scary and not very effective. It burned aviation gasoline in an open flame – not the safest device possible. Since it required oxygen to burn it always went out just as you got high enough to really need some heat. As a rule, we never turned the damn thing on. Shortly after I arrived in Italy, the pilot's gear was improved. We were issued extra heavy long-johns, socks and glove liners filled with wires like an electric blanket. You plugged the socks and gloves into the long-johns and plugged the whole outfit into a jack at your seat. Wow! Now we could discard one layer of underclothing and the bulky, heavy leather outer flight suit and fly in light cotton coveralls and still stay warm the whole mission. And no more

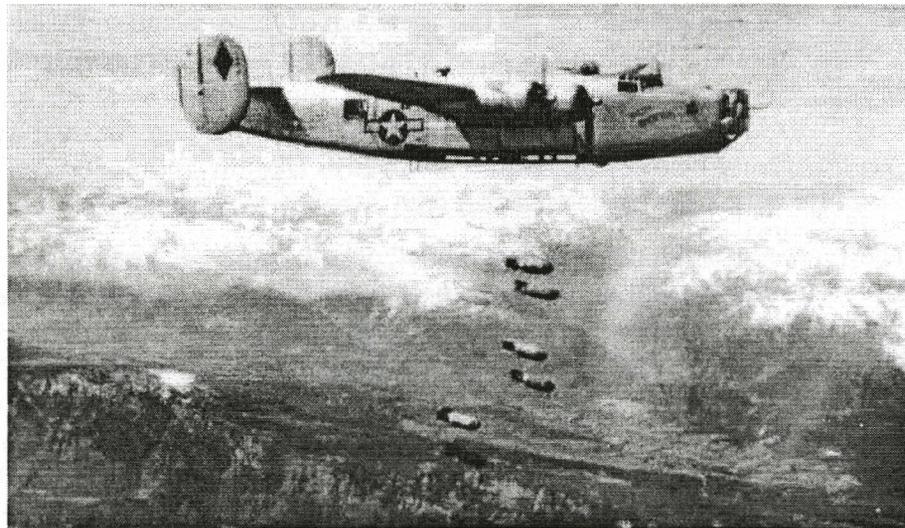
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sweating up a storm on the ground before we got to altitude! It was wonderful technology but that's not how it worked. On my first trip with the new gear, the circuit in my underwear shorted out before we crossed the Alps and I damned near froze my ass off before I got home. And I wasn't the only one. Many others had their hot suits fail. As a result I had to wear my heavy leather flight suit in addition to the electric underwear so I wouldn't freeze if it shorted out. This meant I was even more overheated at low altitudes.

Our steel flak vests protected us from the front but many pilots were injured by shrapnel or shells penetrating the thin metal back of our seats. These seats were replaced with ones having armor plated backs and sides. Called "coffin seats" for their resemblance to a shallow coffin with the lid off, they gave us more protection but had two disadvantages. The seats no longer reclined, a distinct discomfort on long missions. More serious was the fact that the space between the seats was reduced, making it impossible to pass between them wearing a parachute. This was the procedure for bailing out:

- Remove the radio headset
- Disconnect the oxygen mask
- Remove throat mike
- Throw off the flak vest
- Release the lap belt and shoulder straps
- Unbuckle the parachute harness
- Get up and move to a position behind the seat
- Remove the Mae West
- Plug into a walk-around oxygen bottle
- Reach over the seat and get the parachute
- Put the parachute on and buckle the straps
- If over water, put the Mae West back on, and finally,
- Bail out.

I never had to use this procedure; many pilots went down with the plane because they couldn't get out in time.



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THE B-24 LIBERATOR

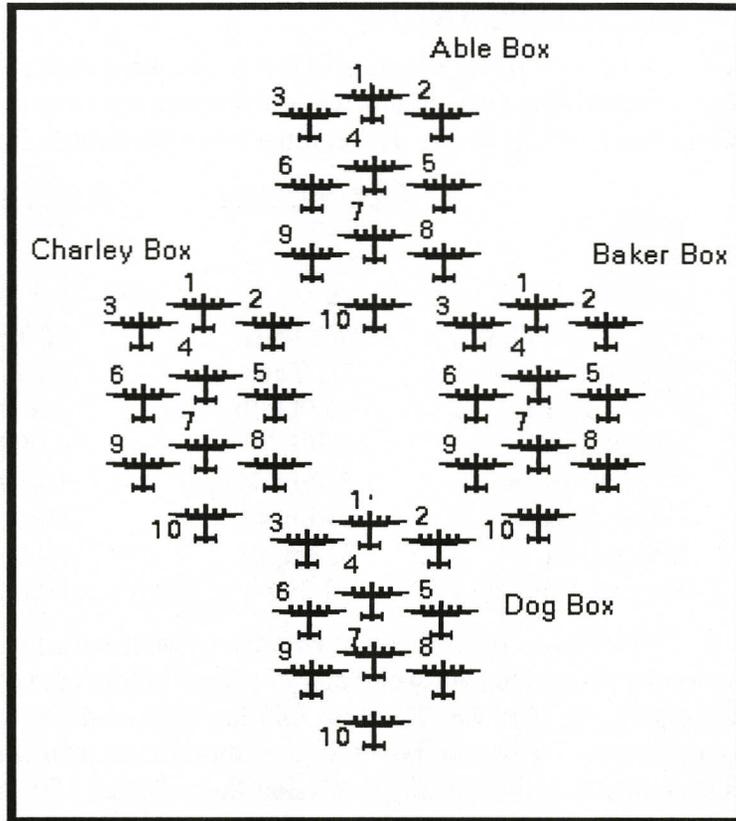
We flew many versions of the B-24 and almost every new plane that arrived at our base had some sort of change or improvement over the last one. The data below describes a typical B-24. The comparison with today's B-2 Spirit is interesting.

	<u>B-24 Liberator</u>	<u>B-2 Spirit</u>
Wingspan	110'	172'
Length	67' 2"	69'
Height	18'	17'
Max Bomb Load	6.4 Tons	20 Tons
Usual Bomb Load	2.5 Tons	20 Tons
Gross Weight	64,000 lb.	130,000 lb.
Max Range	3,700 Miles	6,000 Miles w/o refueling
Combat Range	2,100 Miles	10,000 Miles with 1 refuel
Cruise Speed	215mph	High sub-sonic
Max Speed	313mph	N/A
Service. Ceiling	28,000'	40,000'

However, the maximum emergency wartime take off gross weight was 71,200 lbs. I wonder if anyone ever weighed our planes before take off? On the missions I flew, our average bomb load was 2.5 tons. Our heaviest load was 3.4 tons and our lightest load, one ton, was carried on the mission to support the invasion of southern France. This was a special event, the first night mission flown by the 15th Air Force. We dropped very close to our own troops and there were only six planes sent from our group. We were proud to be selected as one of the six. Our biggest bombs were 2,000 pounds each, which meant we carried 2 of them in each ship. We could carry four 1,000 pounders or eight 500 pounders. We also carried smaller types, like fragmentation bombs, loaded in clusters which would come apart after release and spread the individual bombs over a large area. Small incendiary bombs were packed in large canisters which were split open by a small explosion after dropping so the individual bombs were widely scattered. The type and size of the bomb load depended on the type of target. I was concerned mainly with the total weight, which had to be considered in calculating fuel requirements and power settings for efficient flight. Our bombardier was very much concerned with bomb types because each drop trajectory was critical for his bomb sight settings.

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FORMATION Our group averaged 28 planes per mission when I was there but I flew on two where we had a full complement of 40 planes, 10 from each of the four squadrons. The drawing shows how they were arranged. Within each box, the wing men in each echelon of three planes flew a little behind and slightly above the echelon leader. Each successive echelon flew slightly lower than the echelon ahead. The leaders of the wing boxes (Baker and Charlie) flew behind and slightly higher than the leader of the lead box. The leader of Dog Box flew just below the last plane in the lead box. The idea was to stay as tight as possible but allow for sufficient vertical



Four-Box Formation of Forty Planes

separation so that if a box slid to the side its wing men would not collide with another box. This formation, designed to result in a dense bomb pattern, replaced an earlier six-box formation with six planes in each box.

This formation also improved our defense against fighter attack by concentrating our machine gun firepower. We carried ten .50 caliber machine guns, arranged as follows:

POSITION	GUNS	ANGLE OF FIRE	
		Azimuth	Elevation
Nose	2 turreted	150°	+71° -40°
Top	2 turreted	360°	+90°
Tail	2 turreted	170°	+71° -40°
Left Waist	1 swiveled	100°	+45° -45°
Right Waist	1 swiveled	100°	+45° -45°
Belly	2 turreted	360°	-90°

The ball turret in the belly was particularly effective because its guns were equipped with an analog gunsight that calculated the amount by which to "lead" the incoming fighter, depending on his relative angle of attack and the rate of closure. Each plane could cover almost any point in the sky with a minimum of two and a maximum of five guns. No matter from which direction an enemy fighter approached a 40 plane formation, he could be flying into the range of from 80 to 200 guns!

TAKEOFF AND ASSEMBLY The first problem was getting 40 ships off the ground and gathered together quickly. We taxied out, nose-to-tail, like elephants in a circus, to our single runway, where we were flagged off in the shortest interval safety would allow. If you took off too close to the plane ahead of you, the turbulence created by his prop wash could cause difficult control problems. Even a slight crosswind would blow this turbulence off to the side of the runway, allowing takeoffs at 30 to 45 second intervals. If the wind was straight on, or worse, calm, we would have to wait up to 60 seconds between planes.

The lead plane would set a slow climb at about 160 mph to 3,000', moving in a wide circle around the base. Each following plane would angle slightly inside the circle and pull into its assigned position. At one takeoff per minute, the lead plane would be circling for at least forty minutes before the last man was off the ground. Our leader's job was to get us formed and ready to move into our slot when it came past. On days when all 21 groups of the 15th Air Force were headed for the same general target area, we made a magnificent train of close to 800 bombers, stretching almost fifty miles in length!

Fuel consumption was a big concern. A percentage of our losses occurred when planes ran out of gas before getting back to base. Good flying technique contributed heavily toward the efficient use of fuel. Theoretically, the leader flies in a straight line. Even a good leader veers and changes altitudes as the result of wind gusts or turbulence. He then makes a small correction to get back on course. His wing men veer out (or climb or sink) to avoid a collision and then have to correct back into position as the leader makes his adjustment. Each successive rank of planes will make a larger and larger correction, producing a wave-like effect. In a flight of novices, when the leader veers a few feet, old Tail-end Charley will swing 20 feet from side to side. When control surfaces are pushed into the air stream, drag is increased, speed is lost and more engine power is required to keep up. Thus, following planes tend to burn more fuel than the leaders. Combat damage is another cause of low fuel. Of course, a punctured gas tank will have a direct effect on fuel supply. While a B-24 flying with one engine shot out may be fairly easy to control, fuel consumption will be much higher than normal and it go down in the Adriatic instead of landing at home. The success of the mission, at least in terms of how many of your planes get back safely, is very much dependent on a good takeoff and assembly execution and on the flying skill of the pilots.

ON ROUTE Once joined, we settle into a quiet climb to bombing altitude, usually over 20,000 feet and then maintain a cruising speed of 165 mph. The ship is trimmed to save fuel and the engines are synchronized. Four propellers turning at near but not at the same speed can set up an annoyingly pulsating vibration. To set them all at exactly the same RPM, you look through the visual plane of the two propellers on the right side of the airplane for the moiré-like "shadow" that appears when they are not moving at the same RPM. This is the same effect you see in a movie when the wagon wheels on the stage coach seem to be moving backward. The settings on these starboard engines are adjusted until the shadow disappears. Then the two port side engines are synchronized in the same manner. The final adjustment is made by closing the eyes and listening carefully for the pulsating sound that results if the port and starboard pairs are not matched. By adjusting both the engines on one side to match those on the other side, all

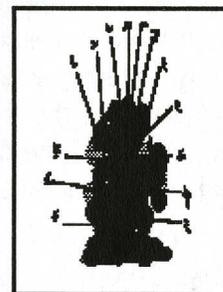
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four engines can be set at exactly the same RPM reducing the annoying drone but saving fuel as well. Of course, every time we changed power settings this had to be done all over again.

As soon as we level out, the gunners get into their turrets to check them for smooth operation. If all is OK, they charge the guns by feeding in a bandoleer of bullets. The ball turret is lowered to its position below the belly. In turn, each crew's gunners check their weapons by firing a few rounds. During this procedure, we slide out of formation so that ejected shells don't hit the planes behind. Most bombs were made to explode on impact and they all had some mechanism to prevent detonation if they were accidentally dropped during loading or were jettisoned during takeoff as the result of a lost engine. Once we got beyond our own lines, the bombardier checks all his switches and arms the bombs by removing this safety device.

Even though we followed the leader, it was essential for the navigator to work the whole trip as if we were the only plane on the mission. At any time, the failure of an engine or other essential mechanical component might make it necessary to leave the formation and return to base alone. He had to know where we were at every moment and be prepared to guide us to safety. In case of serious damage, it was important to know your location relative to national borders. If you had to bail out, it would be helpful to know that a few minutes delay would let you land in neutral Switzerland rather than hostile Germany.

FLAK There were anti-aircraft (AA or Ack Ack) batteries all over Axis territory with major concentrations around major cities and other strategic targets. When I first arrived, all the anti-aircraft shells were detonated by time fuse. This meant that the gunners had to set the timing for our altitude. When they exploded, they made 20 to 30 foot towers of smoke, which lingered in the air. In a heavy barrage, you seemed to fly through a veritable forest of smoke towers. There was no danger in flying through the smoke; the damage is caused by the shrapnel. Most of the force of the detonation, and the resulting flak (pieces of shrapnel thrown off by the explosion) was directed upward, with some flak flying sideways. Little or no damage was done by a shell bursting above you. The most damaging were those that burst just under the aircraft. In that case, you took the full force of the blow. Of course, if one hit you directly, serious damage resulted. Each burst would throw off from 1,000 to 1,500 pieces of shrapnel. We dropped chaff, packages of foil much like Christmas tree tinsel, to confuse the enemy radar. As the chaff drifted down and behind you, their radar focused on the chaff and aimed at a point behind you with the timing fuses set to explode well below you.



Flak Tower

Sometimes it worked but when you have a string of 200 or more bombers above, they were smart enough to take independent sightings and override the radar calculations. I'm sure their fighters would radio our exact altitude to the anti-aircraft batteries below. Later in my tour, they began using proximity fuses which caused them to explode when they came within a set distance to an airplane and these were much more dangerous. Flak was our biggest danger, since there was so much of it. And it got worse as the war progressed. As the Germans retreated, the boundaries they had to defend got smaller and they always took their anti-aircraft batteries with them. The concentration of guns

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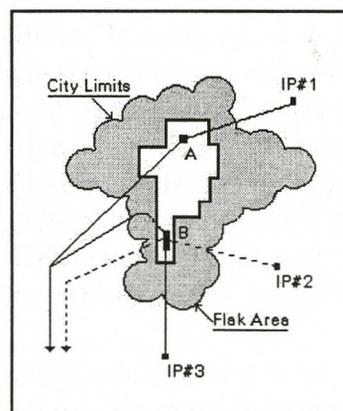
increased, particularly around the major targets. But there were flak batteries outside the target areas as well. It was the navigator's job to keep track of these and direct us to alter course around them.

FIGHTERS At some point along the route, we would be met by enemy fighters, usually Messerschmidt 109s or Folke-Wulff 190s. Their number was variable; some days we would see none and on others they seemed to be all over the sky. Sometimes they would just hover above us, waiting for a ship to pull out of formation with flak damage or mechanical trouble. Then they would pounce on that unlucky fellow and usually succeed in knocking him down. We usually had an escort of our fighters for at least a part of the trip. Our guys flew P-51s, P-47s and P-38s. My favorite was the P-38 because it was such a beautiful plane and it's twin-tailed configuration easy to identify. There were a few trips when enemy fighters hit us very aggressively. Generally, you only had to contend with either flak or fighters. The fighters couldn't attack in the midst of a flak barrage without risk of flak damage themselves. I particularly remember an intense air battle on the mission to Budapest on July 2, 1944. We were attacked by sixty enemy fighters who continued attacking as we flew through heavy flak over the target. At one point several fighters flew right through the middle of our formation, so close I could pick out the facial features of the pilots. That day we destroyed twenty-six enemy aircraft; eight more were probably destroyed and four were damaged. We lost six planes and crews, all from the 744th Squadron. Because of this heavy loss, six of the eight planes the 744th flew that day, my crew was transferred from the 747th to the 744th shortly thereafter. The group's performance on this mission earned it a citation from General Twining, Commander of the 15th Air Force.

Fighter opposition peaked in April, 1944, the month before I arrived in Italy. That month, my group flew 16 missions and met 431 enemy aircraft. That averages out to 27 fighters every mission. Early in the war high target priority was given to airdromes, aircraft factories and oil refineries and this strategy finally paid off. Because of the lack of fighter planes, fields to fly from, gas to fuel them and pilots to fly them, German fighter opposition diminished rapidly. In May we were met by only 114 fighters, 6 per mission. In June we saw 237 fighters, 15 per mission. July was down to 96, just 6 per mission and August was 34, 2 per mission. After August there was no more fighter opposition in our sector; the battle for the skies over Europe had been won by the Allies. It is a point of pride with the 15th Air Force that not a single group was ever turned away from an intended target by enemy opposition!

THE TARGET Most of our bombing runs were made above 20,000 feet to avoid anti-aircraft fire. Each target presented a unique problem. The Intelligence guys would develop maps of the target city with the target clearly marked. The maps also showed the effective range of the enemy anti-aircraft batteries, based on our planned altitude. Bombardiers had photographs of the target area as well. In the sample illustration, the target area is long and narrow, running north/south.

Target A might be a factory. We would approach from an IP (Initial Point) northeast of the target and exit to the



Sample Target Area

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southwest on a path minimizing our exposure to flak.

Target B, a railroad yard, poses an additional problem. The easiest approach follows the dotted line from IP #2. But the target is long and narrow and such a target must be approached on its long axis, from IP #3. Bombs rarely missed a target by being off to one side. The most common errors are bombs falling short of, or beyond the target. For this long target, a slight delay would be planned between bomb releases, producing a stretched-out pattern. Airplane speed, altitude, and wind all affect where the bombs hit along the line of flight while these factors generally do not have a sideward effect.

An approach from IP #3 would give us 10 or 15 minutes on a straight course, necessary for the bombardier to get a good fix on the target. We could cover the target in the right direction and still be able to get out of the flak without too many sharp turns, something not easily accomplished with several hundred planes in close formation.

RETURN Our guiding principle was: "Until you drop your bombs, you're flying for Uncle Sam; after that, you're flying for yourself." As soon as the bombs were away we would drop into a descent and pick up speed to get out of the flak area as soon as possible. Most of the damage done to planes occurred over the target because of the concentration of flak batteries. While only a few planes would suffer fatal damage, almost all were hit and often the extent of the damage was not immediately noticeable. After leaving the target, everybody on board was occupied in looking for damage. A severed hydraulic line might leak slowly and only an hour later would you be aware that you no longer had good control over the flight surfaces. A punctured gas line might not burst into flames but you might not have enough gas to reach home base. A damaged engine might seem to run OK, but you would gradually lose power and not be able to keep up with the group.

When we couldn't keep up with the formation we were sitting ducks for enemy fighters. We would try to stay on the course and drop back from one group to another, taking advantage of all the cover we could get. Another tactic used by "orphans" was especially effective over water. By dropping to a minimum altitude you prevented enemy fighters from using a favorite tactic, coming at you from underneath. Once our formation ran into a storm front over the mountains of Yugoslavia forcing the whole train to turn sharply. Turning a 40 plane formation is a delicate maneuver. When the leader turns, the planes on the inside of the turn must slow their speed to avoid overtaking the planes ahead. Yet the leader must avoid the maneuvers of the 20 other groups that are also trying to avoid the storm. If the leader turns too sharply, the inside wingmen must slow to the point of stalling out. On this day, we were on the inside but the leader was forced to turn so sharply that we couldn't maintain flying speed. Ned and I both struggled to keep the ship in the air as we were forced to a slower and slower airspeed. We put down the flaps – we even lowered the landing gear to create more drag so we could run the engines faster to force more air over the wings. Finally the ship dropped into a slow spin with Ned and I fighting to get her back under control. After a spin of one and a half or two turns, we managed to get her straight and level.¹ By then we had lost several thousand feet and were miles behind the formation so our only alternative was to go

¹ The official wisdom is that it is impossible to bring a B-24 out of a spin with a full bomb load on board!

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home alone. We encountered no fighters but flew all the way across the Adriatic just on top of the waves. Crews that ran out of gas or were so badly damaged they couldn't maintain altitude to get home could also land at some other group's field. There were several such fields north of our location, but we always managed to get back to our own base. Fighter bases were even further north but they had short runways. Several crews from our group used them, some landing safely then running out of runway before they could get stopped. There was a hospital beside the runway at the Foggia base where ships with seriously wounded crewman could land.

LANDING Getting all those planes on the ground as soon as possible was another hectic experience. Planes that were damaged or had wounded onboard would go in first while the rest of the formation circled. It was never easy to estimate how soon you could get down because often a damaged plane would collapse on landing and have to be dragged or bulldozed off our only runway before others could land. Often we were very low on gas, which was embarrassing to admit, so as we circled we were calculating where to put down if all engines started sputtering at once. In our turn we enter the final approach leg at 130 mph. Usually, both Ned and I are on the controls because the B-24 is sluggish and hard to handle at slow speed. Mac is standing between us, calling out our airspeed so we don't have to take our eyes off the runway. Once 'over the fence' we throttle back and gradually slow to 110 mph as we flare out and made contact with the ground. Then we both stand on the brakes to get her slowed enough to turn onto the taxi strip.

After landing, we load into trucks and go to group HQ for de-briefing. The big treat is the coffee and donuts served by the Red Cross girls. I never drank coffee before but learned to like it there, with plenty of milk and sugar. It was the only refreshment available and it sure helped the donuts go down. We have to wait our turn, but sooner or later we are interviewed by a briefing officer. All the officers meet with one man for a general debriefing while the gunners would meet with another. Special sessions are held with the bombardiers and navigators. The information gathered from all of us, along with photographs and other intelligence, provides the basis for the report on the mission.

It is usually somewhere between 2 and 5 o'clock in the afternoon before we are finally trucked back to our squadron area. There we go through the final mission ritual. As we file through the operations office, we are each given a medicinal ration of 2 ounces of whisky. It is always a cheap blend, like Four Roses. Some fellows drink it on the spot but most collected it in canteens for a special celebration. The non-drinkers use theirs for trading purposes. After putting away our gear, we collapse on our bunks until time for supper.

DURATION I flew a total of 34 missions. Double credits were given for long missions to tough targets and since 16 of my missions were doubles, I finished with credit for 50 missions. The average duration of my missions was 6 hours and 41 minutes. My shortest mission, to Marino, Italy, was 4 hours and 5 minutes and my longest, Blechhammer, Austria, was 8 hours and 20 minutes. Those numbers are from group records; everybody on the same mission was credited with the same number of hours. Actual time on my longest was almost nine and a half hours because we lost an engine and were well behind the others getting home.

Chapter 7

Miscellaneous Duties

Crews were broken up when individuals were killed or injured although the ship made it back to the base. Copilots were usually reassigned as aircraft commanders some time in the middle of the tour leading a crew made up of these "orphans". I was promoted to First Lieutenant on schedule but, due to a welcome decline in pilot mortality rates, there were not enough orphans to provide me with a crew. I was re-rated as aircraft commander (pilot) but instead of getting a crew, I was assigned as checkout pilot for incoming replacement crews. I also did some miscellaneous flying, like flight testing planes after engine rebuild or other extensive repairs, ferrying crews to Rome for their week of R&R, ferrying crews to other airports to return our planes that landed there when they couldn't make it home. Usually, these were pretty dull trips but I did enjoy the extra time in Rome.

One day we got a message from a fighter base in Corsica that they had completed repairs on one of our B-24s that had landed there a couple of days earlier. I picked up a copilot and engineer (the minimum crew needed) and ferried another such crew to return our plane. When we arrived the operations officer told us the B-24 needed some more work before it could be released. Smelling something funny about his story, I demanded to see the plane. Reluctantly, he took me to the far side of the strip where they had parked the B-24. It was a mess. Everything inside the cockpit was loose and broken. Even the heavy, long range radio had come loose from its mooring and was lying on the floor in pieces. I asked them why they had told us the plane was ready. Finally the operations officer told me what happened. This was the first B-24 these fighter pilots had seen up close and in fact, the repairs had been completed the day before. But that night in the bar a debate arose about whether you could do a slow roll in a B-24. After a few beers, a bet was made and covered and first thing in the morning the group's ace pilot took our plane up to 20,000 feet and rolled it over! He managed to get the thing back on the ground but everything that wasn't tied down had come loose. We never did get that airplane back.

Checking out new crews was my most interesting duty. First, I would take only the new crew's pilot as my copilot on a mission with a crew of veterans from the orphan pool. This way I could teach him the mission routine and assess his ability as a pilot. It

Chapter 7 – Miscellaneous Duties

also gave him the advantage of having at least one mission under his belt when he flew with his own crew. If he did well, I would let him fly the next mission with his own crew. On this mission he flew the left (Commander's) seat and I would fly the copilot's seat. Usually I could certify the crew as "ready" after this mission but sometimes it took a third mission before they were placed on regular schedule.

The first mission with a new man was always dicey; you never knew what to expect. The new man was understandably edgy. He was on his first mission, flying with a pilot he didn't know, along with a crew of veterans who were waiting for him to screw up. I had a way of relaxing him and checking his temperament at the same time. Once we settled in on our route to the target, it was standard procedure for gunners to check their guns by firing a few short bursts. After sliding out of formation so our spent casings wouldn't hit the other planes, I would give the order to check the guns. Before takeoff and without telling the new man, I would instruct the top turret gunner to point his guns straight forward during the test; normally he would fire off to the side. When facing forward, the muzzles of his twin .50s were just behind and about ten inches above the pilots' heads. Those .50s made one hell of a racket, spurting three foot long flames and shaking the whole cockpit. It was always a shock to the new man and once he got over it he would look over to see me smiling at him. When he realized he had been put through an initiation he usually settled down to a more relaxed attitude. It was a useful test for me because if he didn't jump clear out of the seat I figured he was OK.

I had one unpleasant experience with a pilot who had been a B-24 instructor pilot in operational training in the states. A Captain, he came over as a single replacement, i.e. without a crew of his own. He was not at all pleased at being vetted by a pilot of inferior rank (I was a 1st Lt.). He also was a "fly by the book" type. Combat conditions required exceptions and amendments to "the book". For example, before take-off, the book prescribes a procedure to park the plane, set the brakes and check the engines. Then you are to move onto the runway in take-off position and begin your run. All during this time, the copilot is to read off each item from the checklist and the pilot to call out "Completed" as each item is accomplished. The whole procedure takes a couple of minutes. We did it slightly differently. Prior to take-off, we lined up nose-to-tail like circus elephants on the taxi strip at a right angle to the end of the runway. There was no way to run up the engines without damage to the plane behind. It was important to get off with minimum delay between planes, usually 30 to 45 seconds, so we started our take-off run on the taxi strip and checked the engines while rounding the turn onto the runway, gathering speed as we made the turn. With both hands busy with this flying start, we dispensed with list reading, calling out items from memory. He was not at all pleased when I told him what we were going to do and insisted we follow correct procedure. He had a real fit when I ignored him and went ahead with the engine check and took off by myself. It was all downhill between us from there. After the mission, he complained of my conduct to the Operations Officer, demanding that he be given a different check-out pilot to complete his training. Of course he was refused and was told that everything I had done was proper and necessary. He was also told he had to fly with me and if I didn't certify him he would not be given his own crew but be assigned as a permanent copilot! I wasn't at the meeting, but on our next mission he told me about it and said he was flying with me under protest.

Chapter 7 – Miscellaneous Duties

On this mission he was in the left seat. The route away from target called for a sharp, diving left turn immediately after bomb drop. Since we were on the leader's left wing, we would have to make our turn tighter than the leader's, and at a slower speed – a tricky maneuver. I warned him about this and told him the technique to be used was to cut power completely at the first sign of the leader turning. This would slow us and drop us down so the leader wouldn't run into us. Then he would immediately need to apply full power to restore his position on the leader. He simply nodded but didn't say anything so I knew he wasn't going to try any such silly maneuver as cutting full power while beginning a sixty degree banking turn!

Well, he nearly ran into the leader and we wound up in a steep bank with the leader below us. In this position, he couldn't even see the leader from the left seat. We were so far out of position that about all I could see was the leader's right wing and a bit of the fuselage. I took over the controls, cut power, slid down and left, jammed the throttles full on and rather neatly slid back into proper position. I kept us there until we leveled out on the homeward course and without comment waved at him to resume control. He didn't say a word all the way home. When we got on the ground he shook my hand and apologized for his behavior, saying he recognized that he had almost caused a mid-air collision by not listening to me. The next day the Operations Officer told me he had made a similar apology to him, had complimented me and requested that, if and when he got his own crew, that I be assigned as his copilot! Well, I certified him. But there was no way I was going to fly with him again. As far as I know he did all right on his own.

Chapter 8

Rest and Recreation

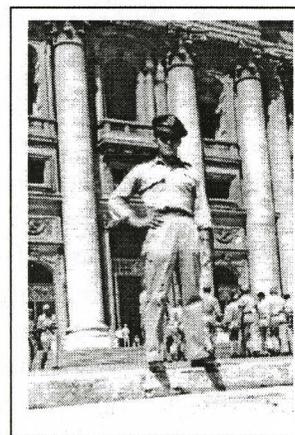
It was Air Force policy to provide a period of rest and recreation (R&R) sometime during the tour. Accordingly, Special Order #160 was issued on August 21, 1944, after I finished my 34th mission.

"The following named O and EM, Orgns indicated, WP fr present sta to AAF Rest Unit #2, Romc, Italy on 22 Aug 44 and return 25 Aug 44, for rest and recreation, rptg upon arrival thereat to 74 Via Venuto, Rome, for billets. Upon completion of this temp dy O and EM will return to propr station."

The translation is:

"The following named Officers and Enlisted Men, from the organizations indicated, will proceed from their present station to AAF Rest Unit #2, Rome, Italy on August 22, 1944 and return August 25, 1944, for rest and recreation, reporting upon arrival thereat to 74 Via Venuto, Rome, for billets. Upon completion of this temporary duty Officers and Enlisted Men will return to proper station."

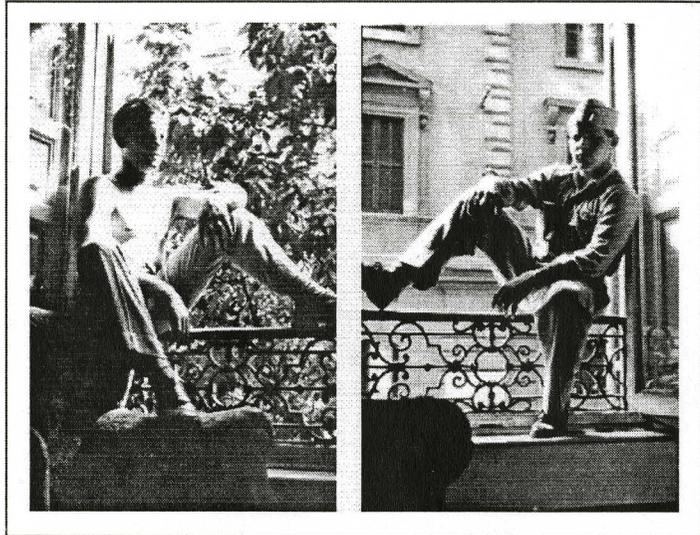
Ned and I, the only ones from our crew among the "O and EM" listed, were ferried to Rome that August morning. We found 74 Via Venuto was the address of The Excelsior, one of the grand old hotels of Rome which had been commandeered as an R&R facility for 15th AF officers. We were assigned a beautiful room with high ceilings and ornately carved woodwork but the beds were standard GI cots. The Germans stripped Italy of everything of value they could move, not only works of art and jewels but furniture, clothing and bedding. The tiled bath had a very large tub and we enjoyed our first bath since leaving the USA. Meals were served in a grand dining room by Italian waiters, who had probably worked there before we came. We had live music at dinner and the food was delicious, at least when compared with our usual fare.



Ned at St. Peter's main entrance,
just under the Pope's balcony.

Chapter 8 – Rest and Recreation

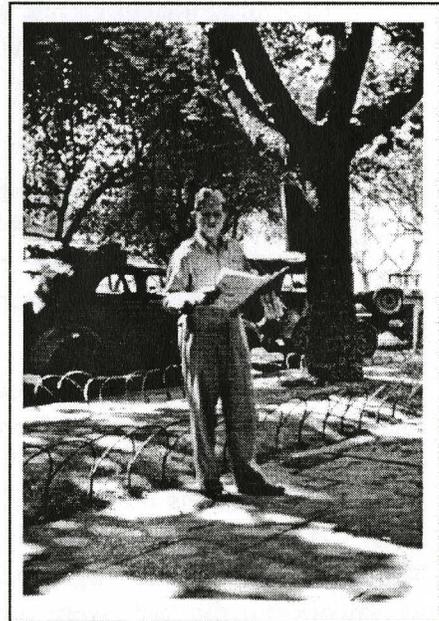
We were given maps and guide books and played at being tourists for three wonderful days. Our transportation choices were walking and Italian taxis, vintage carriages drawn by the scrawniest horses I had ever seen. The Germans had taken all the automobiles still running to aid in their retreat and there was no gasoline available for non-military use. We toured the old Forum, walked around the Coliseum and spent two days on guided tours of the Vatican. We saw the Sistine Chapel, spent



Ned and Joe in the Hotel Excelsior in Rome

hours in the treasure rooms viewing that amazing collection of gold, silver and jewels. We attended the special daily audience the Pope held for servicemen from all countries. We even climbed the thousands of steps up to the Dome of St. Peters where the view of Rome is magnificent. Since our hotel was located in a posh area of old Rome, near the Spanish Steps it was fun just walking around the area. We were surprised to see the meat markets with carcasses of all sorts of animals hung out in the open – covered with flies, of course. The few civilian clubs or cabarets that were open in the evening were attended exclusively by Allied servicemen and Italian women. Wine was the only beverage served and the local musicians tried hard to play the American Big Band songs that were popular. It was a short but very welcome relief from our regular routine.

Normally, there was only one R&R during your tour but we were offered a second one. A staff officer at headquarters was longing to see his girl friend in Cairo. He convinced the Colonel that Rome was becoming spoiled as an R&R spot for airmen because the ground forces were sending more of their people there. Suggesting that Cairo would be a more suitable location, he volunteered to go there himself and check it out. Surprisingly, his plan was approved and luckily, he picked our crew to ferry him there. On September 16 we took off for Cairo with orders to rest and recreate for five days. Old, beat up planes which were no longer fit for combat were used for these junkets and the one we were assigned was a real clunker. Everything went pretty well until we were over the Mediterranean when an engine quit. Having flown on three



Just another tourist on
the Via Veneto

Chapter 8 – Rest and Recreation

engines many times we chose to continue rather than return and miss a rare opportunity to see Cairo. After an eight hour and twenty minute flight we landed at the Air Transport Command¹ base at Heliopolis. We were billeted at the National Hotel, a small civilian establishment in the downtown area. Except for an old British Colonel and his wife and daughter, we were the only servicemen in the hotel.



We arrive in Cairo ready for R&R

Cairo, as the capital of Egypt, a British protectorate, was unscarred by the war. It was also the crossroads for traffic from the US to the Eastern theater and from all of Africa to Europe. The base at Heliopolis was a main stopover for ATC planes and there was a lot of ferry traffic as well. One night I sat in a poker game with some ATC and ferry pilots. They were all trying to get rid of the miscellaneous foreign currency they had collected. Bets were made in francs, pounds, rupees, dinars and all sorts of denominations strange to me. They seemed to have a common understanding of the relative values of these notes. One would open by betting three pounds, the next would raise him four rupees and the bet would be called by another with seventeen rubles. It was far too complicated for me so I folded early.

The next morning, Mac, our engineer, went to the base to check on our plane and came back with the news that our engine failure had been caused by a burned out converter panel and the maintenance people would have to order a replacement. Except for the military shuttle bus which ran between the base and downtown, the only transportation available was the same as in Rome – horse drawn carriages. Every morning the guide we patronized showed up at our hotel with a carriage to take us to see the sights. Cairo was a treat and we tried to see it all. We went to the museums, the pyramids and the nightclubs. Our favorite was the Arizona Club², an outdoor cabaret with an open air stage set in the middle of a gorgeous garden of palm trees and fountains. The show lasted for hours and featured band music for dancing, acrobats, magicians and, of course, belly dancers. It was almost like going to a circus.

There was a theater next to our hotel which I really enjoyed. From the outside it was very plain – four windowless stucco walls with a small marquee over the door. Inside it was something else. There was no roof. Seating was in comfortable wicker armchairs arranged around small tile tables. The walls were lined with beds of flowers, papyri and ornate cacti. Our waiter was all decked out in a long white Arab robe, sandals and a Fez, that red felt hat that looks like an upside down flower pot. He served coffee, snacks and other refreshments during the movie. If you wished, he would bring a hookah (Arabian water pipe) to your table and fire it up for you. Both Egyptian and American films were

¹ The Air Transport Command was the Army's airline.

² Which Mother and I found still operating when we visited Cairo in the 70's.

Chapter 8 – Rest and Recreation

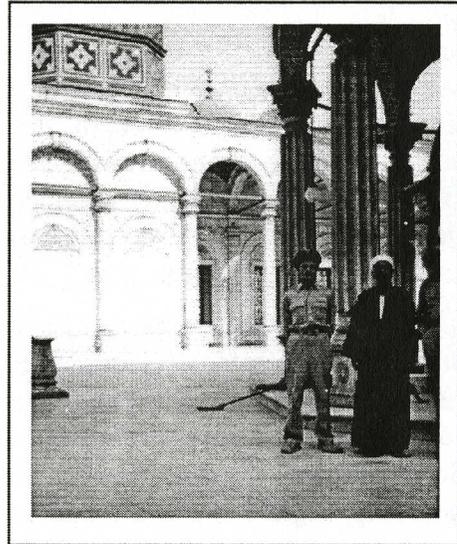
shown and it was absolutely the most comfortable way to enjoy a movie I have ever experienced.

Shopping was a real treat. As soon as you entered a shop, a "boy" would dash out to the local coffee vendor and by the time the proprietor finished with his effusive greeting, the boy would be back with a tray of steaming Turkish coffee. Then the proprietor would trot out his wares – perfumes, rugs, jewels and all sorts of curious things. Antique knives like the one I bought in Marrakech were a big seller here as well.

The British maintained a fancy club on an island in the middle of the Nile river which was open to all Allied officers and we went to ask about playing golf. The golf club was so unique it deserves description. It was flat as a billiard table and each hole had two parallel fairways. A two-foot earthen dike bordered these paired fairways and another dike ran down between them. Nothing grows in that desert land without watering. The tees and greens were watered by sprinkler but the dikes allowed the fairways to be irrigated, a more efficient watering method. While they irrigated the left fairways, players used the right fairways. After a few days they would dry the left fairways for play while they flooded the right ones. I thought it was a most ingenious system but there was one drawback which dampened our enthusiasm for golf. The club pro welcomed us to play but explained that it was absolutely forbidden to recover a ball from any wayward shot which might wind up in a flooded fairway. "Why?", we asked. "Because", he said, "those flooded fairways are home to some particularly voracious Nile crocodiles!" We decided not to play golf.

Don spent his time with a friend from his home town who was in the military police in Cairo and Ned and Bob went out for dinner at a different restaurant every night. I decided to eat dinner in the hotel in order to get a better feel for the local civilian customs. I noticed a very black young man in western dress who ate dinner alone every evening. One night as I was finishing my coffee, he came to my table and apologetically introduced himself. He asked if I was indeed an American and when I confirmed that fact he asked if I would do him a favor. He wanted my opinion on a book he was reading.

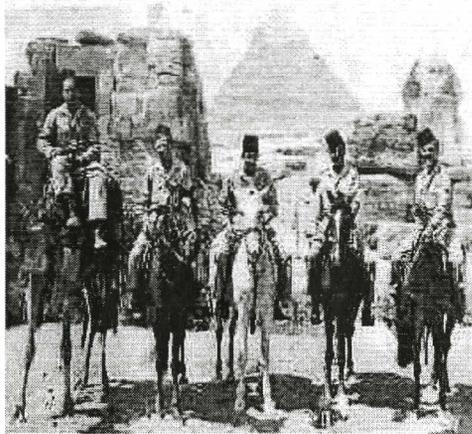
I assented and we adjourned to a small porch for another coffee. He explained, in fluent and crisp British English, that he was from a British colony in Africa who had been waiting for three months for transportation to London to continue his education on a Rhodes scholarship. The book in question was a biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt. He said that he was suspicious that it might not be a balanced portrait of the man and asked me, as an American, if I could make some judgment about its objectivity. I was certainly not qualified to do so but he was so sincere that I began to read his book. After reading only a few pages it was evident, even to my meager experience, that the book was a high blown work of sheer propaganda – there was a lot of this stuff written during the war. I



Bob at the mosque

Chapter 8 – Rest and Recreation

told him that while President Roosevelt was indeed a great man he should not believe everything that particular book said about him. He was grateful, he said, for my opinion. We chatted through another coffee and went our separate ways. I have often wondered what became of him. He might well have wound up one of the leaders of whatever country it was when it was freed from British rule. He may also have been a spy feeling out an American soldier as a source of military information. Cairo, at that time, was full of undercover agents from all nations.



Every day, Mac or I would take the shuttle bus to the base to check on our plane. After four days with no word on when they would get a converter panel we sensed a problem. They had plenty of their own planes to service and the repair of a transient B-24 was very low on their priority list. We were not opposed to extending our visit but we had been spending our money at a rate consistent with a five-day stay. In short, we were nearly broke. After much discussion and moralizing we worked out a solution. All our money was in occupation dollars which we sold for Egyptian piasters at the legal exchange rate. Real American dollars would bring three to four times the number of piasters on the black market. And the black market was all over town. Every shopkeeper quoted prices in both occupation and real dollars. We were allowed to exchange piasters



Ready to leave Cairo - all rested up!

for real dollars at the base finance office, up to a limit of 200 dollars per day. So every morning we would pool our piasters and one of us would go to the base and exchange them for real dollars, which we would then sell for piasters on the street. After holding out our working capital, we could live for another day on our profit. When necessary we could make two trips each day. I hope the statute of limitations has run on this offense because these were strictly illegal transactions. But it was the only way we could provide funds for our extended stay.

One day, base maintenance told me the only place they could get a panel was Miami

Chapter 8 – Rest and Recreation

but hadn't figured out a way to order one because the ATC wasn't authorized to order B-24 parts. Sensing an opportunity I volunteered to fly copilot on one of their C-46 shuttles to Miami, pick up a panel and fly it back on the next eastbound shuttle. The maintenance officer thought this was a great idea, but some higher-up with more sense vetoed the idea. Finally, somebody remembered that a B-24 had crashed at the airport at Suez, less than fifty miles from Cairo. One of their pilots took Mac and me to Suez in one of their C-46s (I flew as copilot) where we found the plane in the sand off the end of the short runway. Mac quickly pulled off the required panel and we went back to Cairo. That night they fixed our old bird and the next day we ended our twelve wonderful days in Cairo with an uneventful eight and a half-hour flight back to our Italian base.

Chapter 9

An Easy Mission

I had already survived thirty-two missions with only the normal terror and trepidation for a stouthearted nineteen year old warrior when I had a chance to volunteer for a mission. One fine August morning in 1944 I was scheduled to fly copilot with my original crew. I suffered the usual inconvenience of attending a rousing 4 am briefing, riding the bouncing truck down to the hardstand where our airplane was parked, squeezing into my flight suit and performing the walk-around inspection in the diligent manner required by our engineer. As I was about to settle down into my comfortable chair on the flight deck for what was expected to be an easy mission to bomb a bridge at Orange, in southern France, I was confronted by a light Colonel from Group HQ who announced he would be riding in my seat that day.

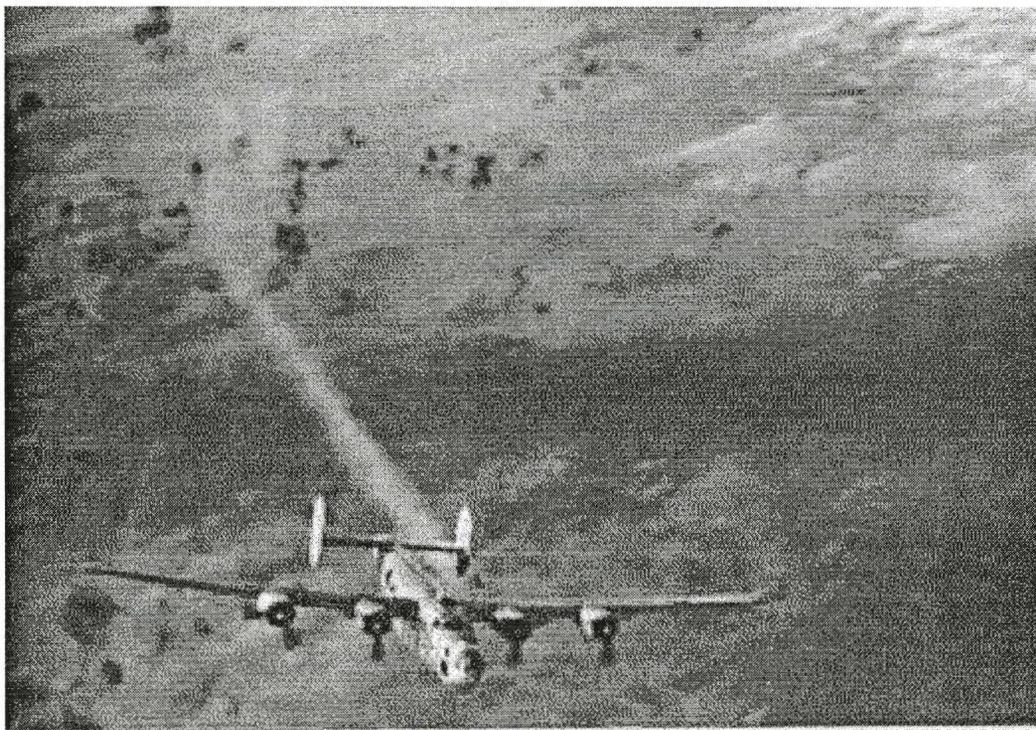
He gave me a choice. I could pass the mission and go back to the sack or I could volunteer to go along, with mission credit, provided that I would forego my usual view of the war from my seat in the front balcony and ride in the rear of the plane with the waist gunners. While it was to be a fairly long trip of over eight hours, the mission had been advertised as an easy one. The target was said to be comfortably away from any concentration of antagonistic German fighters and defended by only a handful of anti-aircraft batteries. It sounded like an agreeable arrangement. I could get mission credit with no heavy lifting and, as a special bonus, I would get to watch the bombs hit – something I couldn't do from my comfortable chair up front. So I volunteered.

I rather enjoyed the first part of the mission. Ned flew the old bird nice and easy, as he always did, and the visitor from Group didn't make too many waves. Wells kept a good watch ahead from his nose turret while Fischer and Bureau, navigator and bombardier respectively, kept busy with those inscrutable activities in their cozy nest under the flight deck. Keith kept track of the planes behind from his tail position and Pappas, up in the top turret, kept the sky from falling on us. Simmons, suspended out the bottom of the plane in the ball turret, stayed busy cranking the guns in his globular greenhouse around the horizon, while waist gunners McGlothlen and Radics kept me from falling out of a window – so we had a pleasantly uneventful trip to the target area.

Chapter 9 – An Easy Mission

It was then I found that the briefing had been only partially correct. True, there weren't too many German fighters but there were far more anti-aircraft batteries than predicted, and they all seemed to focus on us. Consequently, we were soon plowing through a field of black smoke towers made by exploding AA shells, and each little tower was spitting out flak fragments in our direction. As the enemy's ground radar operators began feeding their gunners more accurate information on our position and altitude, shells began bursting close enough to pepper us with flak. The sound of flak fragments hitting a B-24 has always sounded to me like a screen door slamming and, before long, it seemed like screen doors were slamming all around me.

I missed being up front. Normally, I would be helping Ned hold us in close formation, searching out the front windows for flak concentrations ahead, screening the chatter of gunners as they reported the waves of fighters coming at us, and doing any number of other things that contributed to our mission and distracted me from all that rucky screen door slamming. But there in the back I was only a passenger. I couldn't see out very well since McGlothlen and Radics were busy firing their guns out the waist windows. Without an intercom outlet to plug into, I couldn't hear the chatter of the crew. All I could do was hold on to a stanchion to keep my balance as we bounced through the flak. Thus frustrated, I was soon overcome with a surging sensation of insecurity; I desperately needed something to do.



Chapter 9 – An Easy Mission

It was then I remembered the chaff – Christmas-like tinsel which was thrown out of the plane when under anti-aircraft fire. It drifted down behind your plane and reflected the enemy's radar pulses, giving the anti-aircraft gunners a false reading of your location. When it worked, they fired at the chaff instead of you. Throwing chaff would keep me busy and maybe keep some of the flak away from us. Propping my back against the side wall and pulling a box of chaff between my feet, I began throwing bundles of chaff out the window with both hands. It felt a whole lot better just doing something.

We had almost reached the bomb release point when an enormous screen door slammed just under my feet. It not only made a considerable noise, but it gave us a real upward thrust; enough to put me in a short orbit a couple of feet off the floor. I had just regained my feet when the bombs dropped and we dove into a steep 70 degree bank, our standard "let's get-the-hell-out-of-here" maneuver so for a while I was busy just keeping my feet under me. Anyway, terror doesn't last long after a big hit if you're still flying right side up so I calmed down a bit. After we leveled out on our homeward heading we found that the flak had done no serious damage to the airplane and none of the crew members had been hit. However, those screen doors were still slamming from time-to-time so I went back to my box of chaff. To my surprise, all the chaff bundles had somehow been shredded. Mystified, I picked up the box and found a jagged hole in the deck. There were matching holes in the bottom and side of the box. Immediately behind me, I found a much larger hole in the side of the ship. It was clear what had happened. A chunk of flak bigger than a golf ball had come up through the deck in front of my feet. It had passed through the chaff box, shredding the chaff, and then between my legs and out the wall behind me. My high school geometry was sufficient to plot the track of that chunk of iron and to realize that if it had passed through my legs an inch or so higher, the chances of there being any future Shusters in my branch of the family would have been reduced to zero!

Soon we were out of anti-aircraft range and the screen doors stopped slamming. I never really calmed down enough to enjoy the scenery as we crossed the mountains of central Italy and approached our base. Ned made his usual smooth landing, and in no time at all I was having Red Cross coffee and donuts in the de-briefing area. But ever since that trip I get a disturbing tightness in my "nether regions" whenever I'm asked to volunteer for anything.

By the way -- I even forgot to watch the bombs hit.

Chapter 10

Three Stories

SAM'S DEBTS

Shooting craps in the officers club was a pastime for most of us but we had a few serious gamblers in the squadron. One navigator, Sam¹, was a skilled and zealous gambler whose passion got him a lot of trouble and a new nickname. Despite his skillful play, Lady Luck was not always sitting at his side and he had his ups and downs at the table just like the rest of us. Unlike the rest of us, when Sam hit a string of bad luck he was not content to wait until next payday to play again. He would borrow ten or twenty dollars from one of us and try to recoup his losses. And he usually did. I lent him money on several occasions and he usually paid it back in a day or so.

But there was a time when Sam's luck ran bad for a longer period. Sam owed me more than ever and for a longer time but I wasn't worried – Sam was as honest as he was skillful. Then a few of the fellows compared notes. It turned out Sam had borrowed from almost everybody in the squadron, not much from any individual, but all together it amounted to quite a bundle. While Sam was skillful and honest he was not immortal, and he was still flying missions. We decided there was too much to lose if Sam should fail to return from a mission. With Sam's reluctant but understanding agreement, the operations officer accepted our request to hold Sam off flying status until his luck returned and we had got at least some of our money back. For the next few weeks, Sam continued to gamble but he flew no missions. And his luck did change. Little by little he paid off his debts, spreading his winnings a few dollars here, a few dollars there, among all those he owed. This had an interesting affect on our games. Everybody began rooting for Sam, even those who were betting against him in a game cheered when he won because, in a sense, we felt we were winning too, notwithstanding that it was our money we were winning.

It was a high price for Sam to pay because of the fifty mission rule. Every day Sam didn't fly was one more day's delay in his return to the U.S. He finally paid off all his debts and was restored to flight status. On his first mission after his long dry spell, he

¹Real name withheld to protect the guilty.

Chapter 10 – Three Stories

was assigned to fly as my navigator and I have never seen anyone so happy and excited to be going on a mission. But his luck had not completely returned. When we arrived at the plane after briefing, Sam told me he was suffering with "a touch of diarrhea". This was a bit of a problem. The B-24 was not equipped with toilets. We had "relief tubes" adequate for the elimination of urine but no provision for someone with diarrhea. There was still time for me to pick up another navigator so I told him to go back to camp. But Sam assured me he was getting better. He said he would just relieve himself in the weeds once more just before takeoff and he was sure he could complete the trip. He literally begged to be allowed to fly. He had missed a lot of missions and was so eager to go on this one that I relented. It was a relatively short mission so I said he could go along with the understanding that he would have to deal with any problem strictly on his own. He promised that he would.

Sam did very well on the way to the target, even calling me on the intercom from time to time to tell me how well he felt. After we dropped our bombs and were about halfway home I realized that he hadn't called me for some time. Just then, I felt a tapping on my shoulder. I turned and there was Sam, obviously in great distress. He said he just had to go and did I have any suggestions? I reminded him of his promise to handle his own problems and told him that, under no circumstances could he dirty our airplane. As he left the flight compartment I said in jest, "Why don't you just use the bomb bay?", never thinking he would do such a foolish thing.

A short while later came another tap on the shoulder, this time accompanied by a disagreeable aroma. It was Sam, more distressed than ever and coated head to foot with a most unpleasant substance. Sam was a very good navigator but lacking any understanding of aerodynamics, he had tried to relieve himself through the open bomb bay doors. Upon entering the front bomb bay from the pilot's compartment when the doors are open you feel a strong down draft and Sam assumed that anything dropped into this air stream would fall out of the airplane. But that was not the case because that down draft is air being scooped into the rear of the bomb bay, rushing upward and then forward along the top of the bay and down, but just until the slipstream rushing under the plane forces it to the rear of the bay and around that circuit again. In effect, it forms a continuous vertical eddy of air. Sam's discharge re-circulated in this eddy, coating him and the whole inside of the bay!

I have never seen such a sorry mess. There was no way we could allow him to go down in the nose or remain on the flight deck. He smelled so bad even the gunners in the waist couldn't tolerate him with their windows open. So Sam rode the rest of the way home in the bomb bay. The truck driver who was there to take us to de-briefing wouldn't let him on the truck and he had to walk all the way back to his tent.

That's how he got the nickname of "S----- Sam."

THE COTTONTAIL LEGEND

The 450th Bomb Group, whose solid white tail insignia spawned their nickname – "The Cottontails", was the subject of a widely spread legend.² Early in the campaign, one of their planes was so badly damaged that it couldn't keep up with the formation. Flying alone, it was circled by a group of ME-109s from the Hermann Goering Squadron who were fond of lying in wait for just those sitting ducks. As the fighters began their attack, the Cottontail lowered his landing gear. A lowered gear is the accepted aviation equivalent of a white flag. I don't know whether the gear was lowered intentionally or whether it dropped of its own accord due to the damage sustained in the battle. Thinking the pilot had given the surrender signal, the enemy fighters broke off the attack and flew off, leaving two of their number to escort the Cottontail to a German airfield. There may be some element of chivalry in this practice but the Germans were also anxious to get their hands on any American airplane in operating condition for intelligence purposes.

After the main force of fighters had left the scene, the Cottontail's gunners opened fire on the escort planes, destroying one and damaging the other, but not badly enough to prevent it from returning to his base and report the incident. The Cottontail also managed to return safely to its home field. It is not clear why the gunners opened fire. If the gear dropped as the result of battle damage they may not have known it was down. The German interpretation of the events became evident that night when Axis Sally, Hitler's propaganda radio voice whose tirades were aimed at American forces, denounced the Cottontail crew's actions as a vile and treacherous breach of decency. She said that German fighter command pilots had sworn an oath of vengeance against the Cottontails and threatened them with extinction. After this incident, the Cottontails suffered a higher loss from fighter attacks than any other group. It is unlikely that any Cottontail who dropped out of formation ever reached home safely.

The Cottontails twice changed the design of their tail insignia but to no avail. It's not easy to repaint dozens of airplanes in secret and there were enough German sympathizers in Italy to report these changes to the enemy. Thus, they continued to suffer heavy losses throughout the war, or so the legend goes. I cannot attest to the facts of the original incident nor have I ever seen any statistically valid data showing a higher loss rate for the Cottontails. No one has ever been able to document that story, and it probably isn't true, but the Luftwaffe apparently believed it. The same story went the rounds about the 8th Air Force's "Bloody 100th" group, and no one was ever able to document that one either, or identify the crew or the airplane.

However, when we were in Italy, we all believed in the story and it seemed to be true. Since the Cottontails were not in the 304th Wing, they seldom flew near us but when they did, we took a somewhat morbid comfort knowing the Cottontails were around.

² Each bomb group had a distinctive tail insignia. Our group's mark was a white diamond on the upper half when the planes were painted olive drab, When we began flying ships in their shiny aluminum finish, it was changed to a black diamond on a white background with a solid red lower half.

Chapter 10 – Three Stories

A FAILED(?) MISSION

Small mistakes can sometimes have far-reaching consequences, as illustrated by one of our missions to the Ploesti complex of oil refineries in Romania. To understand what happened on this particular mission, you must know how bombs were released. After beginning the straight run to the target, bombardiers followed this procedure:

1. Turn on the release system.
2. Check that the system is working by flipping the manual drop toggle switch. This is moved up or down to the "On" position and always returns to the center "Off" position. A green light flashes if the system is in working order. No bombs will drop because the circuit will still be closed because the bomb bay doors are closed.
3. Turn on the bombsight and begin aiming at the target.
4. As you near the target, open the bomb bay doors.
5. Continue aiming at the target. The bombsight will calculate the release point and activate the release mechanism and drop the bombs. Bombs can also be dropped manually by flicking that drop toggle switch any time the doors are open.

Only the bombardier in the lead plane drops his bombs in this fashion. All other bombardiers release their loads manually when they see the bombs leave the lead plane. This creates a dense bomb pattern aimed by the best bombardier in the group.

On this mission, we were surprised to see the lead plane's bombs drop as soon as its bomb bay doors opened. Most of the planes in the group followed the standard procedure and dropped theirs as well. A few planes dropped late, either because they had not yet opened their bomb bay doors or because of the confusion caused by the lead's early drop. Disappointed, we returned home to learn that a mechanic had mistakenly replaced the manual drop toggle switch on the lead plane with an "On/Off" switch. When the lead bombardier hit this switch to check the system it did not return to "Off" but stayed in the "On" position. So the bombs dropped automatically when the bombardier opened the bomb bay doors just after passing the IP. The simple mistake of installing the wrong kind of switch caused a whole mission's bombs to be dropped on a forest miles away from the target.

We had some fun with this disaster. A mock ceremony was held and the lead bombardier was presented with a fake Iron Cross³, along with a citation signed by "A. Hitler", thanking the 456th Bomb Group and the lead bombardier, in particular, for felling enough trees to provide the Romanian peasants with enough firewood to last the whole winter.

But that's not the end of the story. A few months later, Romania surrendered and all the Allied airmen who had been held prisoner were returned to their bases. The 456th men among them told us the rest of the story. The Germans had built a super-secret, underground oil storage facility in a forest many miles away from the oil complex at Ploesti. No one but the German high command and the few technicians that maintained it knew of its existence. Yes, you guessed right. On our failed mission our bombs had hit and destroyed this secret installation! According to our returning POWs, this threw the enemy into a state of panic. They were convinced that we had developed a super radar

³ One of Germany's highest military awards.

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that could detect metal deep in the ground. How else could such an installation be targeted? All the POWs were re-interrogated extensively about this new "radar". One harassed POW, when asked for the hundredth time about this new "radar", answered "That's bat shit!". The interrogator, unversed in American profanity, thought the POW had given him the code word for our new radar and this triggered a whole new flurry of interrogations. The POWs were mystified; why were the Germans were so anxious to learn about the defecation of a small winged mammal?

Little did that poor mechanic know that his error would cause so much consternation and disruption to the German intelligence machinery!

Chapter 11

My Last Mission

It was group policy to assign only easy missions to crews nearing the end of their tour, but somehow, the system didn't work for me. My final list made a tough package:

- October 04 Munich West Marshalling Yards, Germany
- October 07 Vienna Winterhaven Oil Depot, Austria
- October 12 Bologna Munitions Factory, Italy
- October 13 Blechhammer Oil Refinery, Germany
- October 16 Daimler Assembly Plant, Steyr, Austria
- October 20 Munich Reim Airdrome, Germany

All but Bologna were "doubles". Munich and Vienna were the targets most heavily defended by AA guns. Blechhammer was my longest mission; we were told at briefing that one out of four planes would run out of gas before reaching home. Steyr was in a heavily defended industrial corridor between Munich and Vienna.

Our crew was split up for the mission to Munich West Marshaling Yards on October 4th. Don was navigator on the crew flying deputy lead and Bob and I were substituting in another crew flying on the other side of the lead plane. As we approached the target, we saw Don's ship take three direct hits within a short period. We watched it slowly spin out of formation and turn over as it fell to the ground and prayed that Don was riding one of three chutes we saw leave the wounded plane. Don's loss had a sobering effect on all of us. We were all close enough to our 50 mission total to feel optimistic about actually going home and this was a grim reminder that we were all still quite vulnerable.

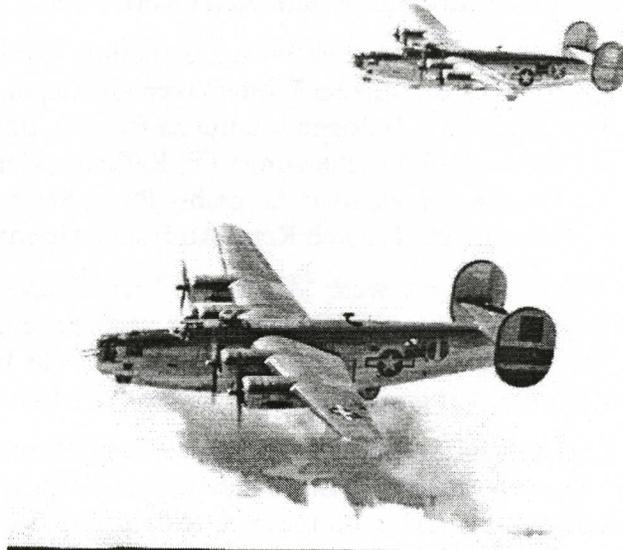
By October 20th I needed only one double mission or two singles to complete my quota of 50. I was assigned to give another new crew its mission check-out and I was in a very positive mood as I went to briefing. When the BO pulled back the curtain there was a chorus of moans and groans. The long red line lead right to Munich Reim Airdrome, a tough target in the same area where Don had been shot down three weeks before. Even the choice of Munich didn't dampen my good feeling.

We wore our dog tags on every mission. On the same chain with my tags, I carried a

Chapter 11 – My Last Mission

St. Christopher's medal and a little bell from Capri that I picked up someplace – my good luck amulets. Checking out the plane that morning, I discovered I had left my chain with the dog tags and the charms in my tent. Even that didn't seem to bother me. It wasn't very smart to fly without dog tags – you could be shot as a spy if you bailed out over enemy territory and were captured- but there was no way I was going to abort this mission!

I had no problem on the way to the target. The new crew I was checking seemed about average, except for the engineer, who was a real dolt. Weather prevented us from reaching Munich and we dropped on the Bad Aibling airdrome between Munich and Salzburg as an alternate. There was a fair amount of flak and we picked up some damage. I had trouble maintaining engine power and had to drop out of formation before we got to the Italian border. The Germans were out of fighters, pilots and gas, so I didn't worry about getting picked off. One engine quit but she flew well on three, though burning more gas than normal. I wasn't worried about her conking out completely but I was concerned about making it back to base before the gas ran out. Fuel gauges on the B-24 were not very accurate or reliable. A good engineer kept a constant calculation of fuel consumption based on engine power settings, altitude, temperature, etc. Our regular engineer, Mac, was a whiz at this and could tell me how much fuel we had remaining at any point in the mission. The klutzy engineer on this crew hadn't bothered to record any power settings; he probably didn't know how to do the calculations anyway. As we neared our base he told me we had a gas leak and that the bomb bay was covered with gas. I sent the copilot back to verify this incredible report. If there was a gas leak as big as he reported we would have exploded long before he could get up to the cockpit to tell me about it.



Sure enough, it was hydraulic fluid, not gas. Hydraulic fluid loss can be very serious since the hydraulic system powers the flight controls, the landing gear and some other systems. I had no trouble with the flight controls but I was a bit worried about the landing gear. There are two redundant ways to lower the gear if the primary hydraulic system is damaged. It can be lowered with a hand pump supplying hydraulic pressure or with a hand-cranked steel cable. Another duty of the engineer was to report when the gear was down and locked. A small red pin pops up when the gear is locked but is only visible from the engineer's station. We needed his OK before trying to land.

Everyone else had landed by the time we got home and because my gas gauges were down on the peg I planned to make a straight in approach. When we lowered the gear it didn't sound, or feel like it had gone all the way, but the engineer reported that it was

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"Down and locked". I sent the copilot down to check; I was not about to trust my last landing on the judgment of a dodo who couldn't tell the difference between gasoline and hydraulic fluid. The copilot reported that the gear was not locked, just hanging. I pulled out of my approach and ordered the engineer to pump the gear down. Not knowing how much fuel I had or how long it would take the dodo to get the gear down, I climbed to three thousand feet and ordered everyone to be ready to bail out if we ran out of gas. I've forgotten how many turns of the crank it takes to lower the gear and lock it but it's a lot and they're not easy turns because the gear has to be pulled forward into the slipstream. After several circles over the field the engineer declared the gear locked in place. When the copilot confirmed this, I ordered everybody to their landing stations and headed straight for the end of the runway. The landing was routine – smooth and straight. I had no problem on the taxi strip to our parking place. But just as I turned into the hardstand the engines sputtered and died. There wasn't enough gas left to turn the ship around onto its proper parking position. I signed the flight record and left her sitting where she stopped.

I haven't flown a B-24 since that day.

Chapter 12

A Thanksgiving Story

For those of you unfamiliar with the workings of the telephone in 1944, a little explanation will give meaning to this story.

The telephone system was comprised of thousands of local exchanges. Each home with a telephone was connected to an exchange through a system of lines running through the community. Each line serviced from 8 to 12 "parties". All calls were managed by a live operator at the central office of the exchange; there was no direct dialing. To make a call, you picked up the receiver. If the line was not in use this action sent a signal to the operator. She (they were all females then) would announce "Operator" and you gave the number desired. The operator then connected your line to the destination line and rang the party sought. When someone picked up that phone you began speaking.

Operators could not ring a single phone; each ring resounded at all phones on that line. Each party had a unique ring pattern, e.g. two shorts, two longs, a short and a long, two shorts and a long. Our home in St. Johns, a small town in central Pennsylvania, was serviced by the Drums exchange. Our number was: Drums 34-R-2, i.e. the Drums exchange; line 34; ring pattern 2. Our ring pattern was two shorts. You were supposed to pick up only when you heard your ring pattern. This led to a kind of "For whom does the bell toll?" game. On the first ring, we stopped and listened. If it was a short, we listened for the next ring; if the second ring was a long, we knew the call wasn't ours. If the second ring was also a short, we still had to wait to be sure it wasn't followed by a third ring. In 1944, this same game was played in all the houses in America every time the phone rang.

Long distance calls were made by connecting all the local exchanges between the calling exchange and the destination exchange. To call our home from Philadelphia, you had to tell the long distance operator you wanted Drums 34-R-2. After looking up the routing, the operator would call Harrisburg, the first junction point and ask to be connected to the next junction point, and so on. Since you had to stay on the line while these connections were

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made you could trace the progress of the call through the many steps necessary to reach the Drums exchange.

Party lines were not private. Remember, to make a call you had to pick up the receiver. If the line was busy, you couldn't help hear some of the conversation before hanging up. If the topic was interesting, even the most respectable caller might be less than prompt in returning the receiver to the cradle. Nosy people could pick up the receiver and listen to any call in progress. Every line had its "snoopers", and we knew who they were. You could sometimes tell when someone was snooping. You heard a "click" when someone else picked up the receiver, and another "click" when he hung up. If, during a call, you heard a single "click", you knew someone was snooping. If you heard a "click" followed shortly by another "click", it probably meant someone had tried to place a call but had hung up on finding the line was busy. Of course, it might also have meant you had two snoopers on the line.

People were creative in dealing with snoopers. I've heard my Mother say, "Mrs. Jones, please hang up, this doesn't concern you." One lady, who talked a lot, kept a police whistle by the phone. When she suspected a snooper, she gave a blast on the whistle. It either disparaged the snooper or rendered him ineffectual by reason of temporary deafness. Party lines were largely responsible for my Dad's definition of a small town as a place "...where everyone knows what everyone else is doing and reads the newspaper only to see who got caught at it." Operators could listen in on every call and they knew what calls everybody made or received, both local and long distance. Some were more inquisitive than others and there surely was some abuse. But you knew party lines weren't private and could avoid discussing really sensitive topics over the phone. Telephone operators, even those who were not overly curious, were inescapably well informed of the private lives of their customers and were in a position to render a more personal type of service when it was needed and justified. Ethel was our favorite operator on the Drums exchange. I never met her and I didn't know anything about her, even her last name, except that she was a courteous, discrete, and helpful operator. And that's what this story is about.

In October of 1944, as I neared the magic fiftieth mission which would mark the end of my combat tour I began looking forward to a state-side transfer. I hadn't thought much about going home before because focusing on the odds of completing 50 missions tended to be somewhat depressing. I wrote home regularly and, since wartime censorship did not prohibit telling the number of missions completed, my folks were aware of my progress toward that goal. Recently, Mother's letters all included the question, "When will you be home?" I avoided answering that question until after my last mission on October 20th. Only then did I write that, with luck, I might be home by Christmas. Actually, chances were fairly good for a return by Thanksgiving but if I had said that, Mother would expect me by the first of November and be in a real state until I got there. I didn't want to create an unnecessary period of anxious waiting for Mother and Dad, so I left plenty of leeway in predicting my arrival. Better to surprise them by arriving early than disappoint them by being late.

On November 6th, I flew to Naples to wait for space on a boat to the states. This was the least predictable stage of the journey. It took 10 to 15 days to make the Atlantic crossing, but

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the irregular sailing schedules were kept highly secret because of continuing enemy submarine attacks on Allied shipping. Not knowing whether my wait in Naples would be 3 or 30 days, I settled into a pleasant state of idleness and determined to enjoy Naples. I was quartered in an old commercial downtown hotel commandeered by the Army. With no duties except to check each morning to see if my shipping orders had been issued, I spent most of my time just walking around Naples. Each afternoon I went to an opera at the Teatro de San Carlo. This famous opera house was run by the British Special Service Forces for all Allied servicemen. The operas were all Italian classics, performed by local musicians and singers. Never having attended an opera before, I thought they were magnificent productions, especially so because of the reasonable ticket cost of \$2.00. "Tosca" was likable, "Aida" exciting, "Rigoletto" stirring and "Il Trovatore" long. My favorite was "La Boheme".

On November 11th (Armistice Day, as it was called then), after only a 5 day wait, I was ordered to be ready to leave Naples at 4 p.m.. I was packed, ready and waiting long before the appointed time. Before the war, the USS Mariposa had been one of the Matson Line's luxury liners on the San Francisco-Hawaii route. When war came, she was converted to a troopship. I boarded that afternoon, along with a happy crowd of what seemed like thousands of others. It took all evening to get everybody boarded, settled into cabins and fed. I stayed on deck watching the dark and shadowy Naples harbor until sometime after midnight, when the Mariposa finally weighed anchor and I had my last sight of Italy.

While the trip home was thankfully uneventful, it wasn't exactly a luxury cruise. I was assigned to a small, double cabin on a lower deck, which would have been skimpy for two people. Unhappily, it was fitted out with four rows of triple-decker bunks. Believe me, by the end of our 10-day crossing, all twelve of us were very well acquainted with each other. But, what the hell, we were going home. The only water provided for washing and shaving was cold sea (salt) water. I used a straight razor then and never was very good with it. The cold salt water didn't raise much of a lather and it made every little nick and scrape burn like the devil. After the first morning's painful shave I engaged in a little reconnaissance of the ship's infirmary just across the hall from our cabin and found a sink with both hot and cold fresh (i.e. not sea) water. The infirmary was off-limits unless you were on sick call, but this particular sink was not well guarded. Every morning thereafter, I appropriated a canteen cup of that forbidden water for my morning shave. Having hot, fresh water for shaving might not sound like much to you but it mightily improved my comfort level on the trip home. After all, "Luxury" is a relative term.

Twice a day we filed into the large dining room to our assigned table for a meal. The food was typical Army – OK, but nothing to write home about. Most of my time during the 10 day crossing was spent on deck. All the interior "lounge" spaces were as crowded as my cabin. I would get a book from the USO library and sit on the deck reading while listening to the mixture of classical music and pop tunes that was piped topside. By the way, "sit on the deck" should be read quite literally. There were no deck chairs; you just sat on the cold steel deck itself. Just watching the sea go by had a calming and unwinding effect. You can get very patient knowing that each wave crossed puts you are that much closer to home. The weather was mild and the sea was fairly calm except for some choppy swells in the Strait of

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Gibraltar and a two-day storm in the mid-Atlantic. The Mariposa was big enough to be stable even in that storm so I had no problem with seasickness. It was entertaining to watch our destroyer escort bob and sway a good 45 degrees off-center in the surging sea and marvel how the men on that craft could tolerate such a buffeting. Not everybody fared as well with seasickness as I did. There was a captain at our table the first night in Naples who didn't show up to eat again until breakfast the morning after we anchored in Boston harbor. He had spent the whole trip traveling between his bunk, the latrine and the infirmary.

We spotted the lightship outside Boston harbor just after sunset on Tuesday, November 21st – two days before Thanksgiving. We docked after breakfast Wednesday morning and, after disembarking, were bussed to a nearby Army base. Once there, I headed for a telephone to call home – along with a million other guys. The base had a telephone center, manned by operators. I wrote my home number on a call slip and sat down to wait my turn. After 45 minutes, the clerk told me "There is no answer at that number." My turn came up every 45 minutes or so – but each time the result was the same: "There is no answer at that number." Each time I filled out another slip and waited some more, my spirits falling with each failure to reach my family.

When the time came to board the train I still hadn't been able to contact my folks. After a dull and lonely train ride, we arrived at the Fort Dix processing center outside of Philadelphia in the early evening. The old Master Sergeant who met us rasped, "You guys aren't scheduled for processing until tomorrow but that's Thanksgiving and some of you may live close enough to get home for a bit of turkey, so we've decided to start now and to get you out of here by morning." Who said the Army doesn't have a heart? That Master Sergeant and his crew stayed up all night, completing the seeming tons of paperwork required to get us on our way. All night long I went from one processing station to another, with trips to the phone center in between. All night long I got the same message: "There is no answer at that number." By morning I was convinced that there was no way I could celebrate Thanksgiving with my family.

By 10 o'clock Thanksgiving morning I had finished the paperwork and was on a bus to Philadelphia, where I hoped to catch an early train to Hazleton. That bus ride kind of completed my transition back into the civilian world. Each suburban town we passed through was having its Thanksgiving Day parade. It was a treat to see those happy and healthy high school kids marching away, banging drums and blowing bugles, especially the cute girls bouncing their pom-poms and swishing their tutus. They struck me as so carefree, young (I was an old twenty at the time), and so very, very different from the sad and hungry youngsters I had seen in Italian villages. I waved to each parade we passed, grinning with thanksgiving and delight.

By the time I got to the railroad station I was feeling pretty good again until I learned that there was no train to Hazleton until 5 o'clock and it wouldn't get there until midnight. Depression and disappointment returned. After coming all the way from Italy I was looking forward to a sad and sorry Thanksgiving – a cold turkey sandwich in the train station for my holiday meal, a long train ride, a lonely Hazleton arrival in the middle of the night, a bed in the police station and an 8 miles walk to St. Johns the next morning. And then I would have

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to bunk in with one of the neighbors until my family came home.

There was still 5 lonely hours until train time, so I decided to call home one more time, even though all I expected to hear was "There is no answer at that number." With no Army phone center in the station I had to place this call myself, just like a regular civilian. I found a phone booth and declared to the long distance operator,

"I would like Drums, Pennsylvania, 34-R-2, please."

The operator: "Just a minute, please."

Another voice: "Harrisburg operator."

The operator: "This is Philadelphia, connect me with Sunbury."

Another voice: "Sunbury operator."

The operator: "This is Philadelphia, connect me with Berwick."

Another voice: "Berwick operator."

The operator: "This is Philadelphia, connect me with Hazleton."

Another voice: "Hazleton operator."

The operator: "This is Philadelphia, connect me with Drums."

Another voice: "Drums operator."

Suddenly, the cloud of self-pity surrounding me was blown away by the sound of this familiar voice. It was Ethel and she never sounded so good; maybe, just maybe, she could do something to help. But I didn't say anything to her yet – phone company rules permitted you to talk only to the operator who placed the call.

The operator: "This is Philadelphia calling 34-R-2."

The phone rang – and rang – and rang. But even from Ethel all I heard was:

"There is no answer at that number."

In frustration, I broke the rules and said "Ethel, do you have any idea where they might be?"

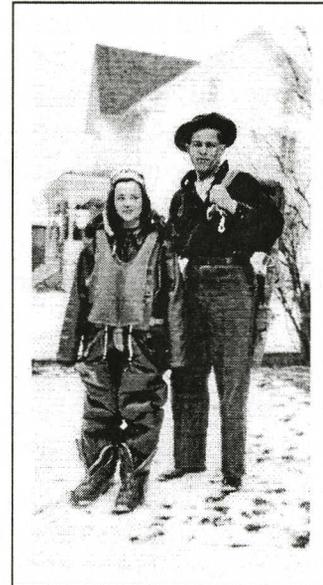
Ethel's animated reply fairly exploded in my ears "Is this you, Sonny? I thought it might be you calling the last couple of days – but your folks aren't expecting you until Christmas – they left last Tuesday to spend Thanksgiving with friends in Philadelphia – I don't know exactly who they are staying with – but they won't be back until Saturday!" After some happy chit-chat, which must have amazed the Philadelphia operator, I thanked Ethel again, wished her a happy Thanksgiving and hung up. There were only two families in Philadelphia my folks might visit for the holidays – the Hemsath's and the Eichner's. I found the Hemsath's number and called them first. "Hello." I nearly passed out – it was my Dad who answered the phone! They were in the process of sitting down for the Thanksgiving meal and Dad just happened to be nearest to the phone when it rang. Little time was wasted on telephone greetings; they told me which trolley car to catch and twenty minutes later I was seated at their table with family and friends.

That's the end of the story. Telephones are much more efficient now but I owe my most memorable Thanksgiving to an old-fashioned system of party lines, cumbersome long distance calls and nosey local operators.

Chapter 13

The Combat Veteran

From Thanksgiving until December 13th I was on leave at home in St. Johns, and enjoying every minute. Then I had to report to the 1078 AADBU, in Richmond, Virginia for post-combat evaluation. I don't remember much about the evaluation. In personal terms, I was only concerned with one question – would I get a combat assignment or something else. I really wasn't too interested in another combat tour in the Pacific, although it would be fun to fly the B-29, our new, bigger bomber. But I decided not to worry since I couldn't influence the decision anyway. I met another pilot from Hazleton who had a car and we went home nearly every weekend. After Christmas I was ordered to Kirtland Field, Albuquerque, New Mexico for more evaluation. I enjoyed roaming around Albuquerque's old town. We went to movies at the old Kiva theater and there was lots of party activity. I enjoyed the good Mexican food and I found a place to go horseback riding.



With sister Pat

AT-6 Familiarization – MAAF, Merced, California – 9 Feb, 45

Finally, I was ordered to Merced, California for single-engine familiarization, the first step to becoming a flight instructor. We were given a couple of hours of instruction in the AT-6, a single-engine trainer, and told to fly it four hours every day. There was no lesson plan; we were just to get familiar with the airplane in any way we chose. I was the only bomber pilot in the bunch; the rest of the guys had flown fighters and I took a lot of ribbing from them. They were a wild bunch; I particularly remember a red-headed Major who had flown two tours in Europe and was mad because he had been sent home. They spent all their flying time in mock dogfights and invited me to join in – which I did – but tentatively. The routine was more like follow-the-leader. One guy would be "it" and everybody else would try to stay in a line behind him while he would try to shake off his tail. After ten days of fun and games I went on to Waco.

Basic Instructor School – WAAF, Waco, Texas – 20 Feb, 45

The method of training instructors was straightforward. We followed the student curriculum, except that my instructor would first 'teach' me the day's lesson, pointing out the pitfalls and common student mistakes and sharing his tips with me. Then we would swap seats and I would 'teach' him the lesson. In the afternoon we paired with other students and took turns 'teaching' each other. It was a pretty effective technique. Many lessons were boring for us and we would often sneak off for more dogfights.

In the first lesson on night flying, each student was assigned to fly around at an assigned altitude in a stack above the airport or other marker for four hours. On that lesson, I was paired with the crazy Major I had met in Merced. He was flying the front seat and I was playing instructor in the back. After about half an hour he called on the intercom saying he was bored and did I mind if we went for a ride. It was a beautiful, clear night with a big moon and when I offered no objection, he broke out of the pattern and took off across the flat prairie east. After a while he motioned me to look below. I saw a single train track running straight all the way to the horizon. The moonlight was bright enough to make out a long line of freight cars following a lonely engine down that track. The Major opened the throttle and raced down the track until we were about twenty miles ahead of the train. I began to wonder what he had in mind when he cut power and, dropping down to ten feet above the track, headed straight back toward the train. Then he turned off our lights. Before long I could see the pinpoint of light from the engine's headlight. For a long time it didn't seem to change, then it began to grow larger at a faster and faster rate. When we were a couple of miles from the train, the crazy Major flipped on one of our landing lights. When we were so close to the train that I began to panic – he turned off the light and pulled up into a steep climb.

After reaching a safe altitude, we headed back for the train. We could see that it was stopped and there were several red lanterns visible moving along side the train. Finally, the lanterns all got back on the train and when it began to move we flew back to our assigned position in the stack and completed our lesson like good boys.

At Waco I met Terry Salt, with whom I've maintained a relationship since. He had been a pilot in the 456th Bomb Group when I was but we hadn't known each other there. Terry's wife Jane was staying in Minneapolis so Terry and I spent a lot of time together. We both liked to play handball and shoot pool. Terry was an excellent pilot and I could never get the better of him in our dogfight games. Every airplane has its own flying personality. This is especially common in training planes. After years of hard student landings, airplanes tend to develop warps and bends which influence their flying characteristics. One morning I went up to practice aerobatics in a plane that had been pretty badly banged around. When I tried a simple loop, the plane automatically flipped right side up at the top of the loop. Apparently, one wing had been badly distorted and would stall out when inverted. Try as I might, there was no way I could complete a loop without flipping out at the top.

When I went in for lunch, I noticed that Terry was assigned to the clinker I had flown that morning. Aha! I've got him! At lunch I challenged him to a dogfight and he readily accepted. Knowing I had the edge, I laid on the challenge with lots of bravado. Once we got out of the traffic area Terry fell in behind me and I started with some tight turns and

other simple maneuvers. Terry stayed on my tail. Finally, I played my ace. I went into a shallow dive to pick up speed and pulled up into a big, lazy loop, slowing to near stall speed at the top. I gleefully watched Terry in the rear view mirror and sure enough, just as we got to the top of the loop – he flipped right side up. I taunted him on the radio and waited for him to catch up to me again. By the time he had flipped out of the third loop he was pretty angry at the ribbing I was giving him. He knew his airplane was the cause of his problem; what he didn't know was that I had flown that same plane in the morning

Another student and I had an interesting cross country to El Paso, about 600 miles away. On the way down, he flew in the front seat and I navigated from the rear. The navigation was fairly simple except for one little problem. There were a number of bomber training bases in west Texas and the landscape was littered with bombing ranges with targets marked by concentric circles on the desert floor. It was absolutely necessary to navigate around these restricted areas. Even though the practice bombs had just enough powder to send out a little smoke, they could cause serious problems if one fell on top of you. We got to El Paso with no difficulty.



Ready to go

After spending the evening in Juarez, consuming beer, tequila and other nourishing drinks, we were both in pretty bad shape the next morning for the return flight. Since it was my turn to fly and his turn to navigate, I climbed into the front seat and he piled into the back. I took off to the east and once clear of the base traffic called back to him for a heading. No answer. I looked in the mirror and he was sound asleep with his earphones in his lap – on top of our only set of maps. I tried in vain to wake him but my options were limited. Noise didn't work. I couldn't be too aggressive in shaking the plane because of the queasy condition of my own stomach and there weren't many things I could find to throw at him. I had to navigate from memory and keep a close watch for the big white circles on the ground which marked the bombing targets. I found the airbase at Midland without difficulty and when I landed my buddy woke up. After a lunch break, we went on home to Waco without further incident.

Instrument Instructor School – LAAF, Lubbock, Texas – 25 APR 45

After graduation from Waco, I was sent to instrument instructor school at Lubbock. This was a tough, two month course with lots of demanding precision flying on instruments. Lubbock was a nice town with lots of friendly people. I chummed around with two Mormon pilots and we met some nice girls. Our dates were usually roller skating or picnics at Buffalo Lakes.

Basic Flying School – Minter Field, Bakersfield, California – 20 JUN 45

I finally finished training and got a 'job'. I was assigned as flight instructor in this basic flight school, flying the AT-6¹. The training work was fairly routine and I enjoyed working with student cadets. Terry Salt was assigned to the same school and his wife, Jane, and son, Rocky, joined him. They had a small apartment on base in the married officers quarters and they adopted me as one of the family. We only worked half a day. That is, we were assigned to fly either in the morning or the afternoon. Terry and I usually spent the other half-day playing handball and shooting pool in the officers club. Bakersfield was a small country town in those days and hotter than blazes in the summer. The biggest excitement was the boxing matches on Friday nights. A local promoter ran about 15 amateur bouts in a local arena and Terry and I went often.



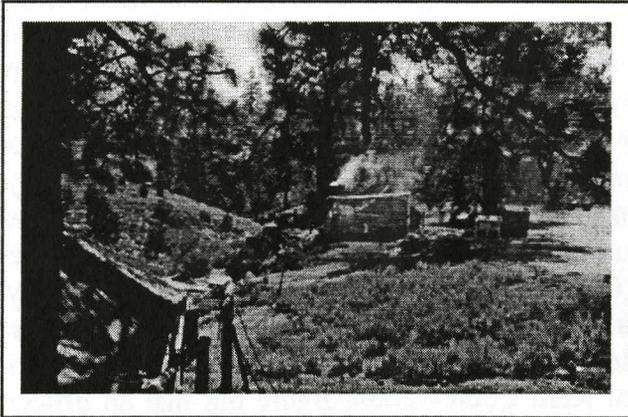
Jane & Terry with Rocky

The nicest thing about Minter Field was that the officers club ran a fishing camp up on the Owens River, above Mono Lake. After finishing the last student on Friday afternoon, I would sign out my own AT-6 and take off for the mountains. With the temperature on the flight line near 110 degrees it was a treat to cruise above the cool pine forests on the slopes of Mt. Whitney. A 90 minute flight put me over the camp. The camp was simple two-man army tents, with a cook tent and a big dining tent right on the riverbank. The camp staff was Sgt. Reese, manager; Harry, helper and a cook we knew only as "Cookie". We landed at an old dirt strip maintained by the Forest Service about a half-mile from the camp, which was nestled in the piney foothills. Since there were usually cows grazing on the airport, it was routine to fly over the camp as a signal for Reese to drive down to the strip in his Jeep, along with his dog. I would circle the strip until the dog cleared the cows off the landing area. After landing, I would tie down the airplane and ride back to the camp with Reese.

Reese started ribbing me whenever he got there before I was ready to land. It was hard to get there before he did because the safest way to buzz the camp was up the river valley which allowed plenty of clearance between the foothills. However, this course headed away from the strip and it took time to turn and get back to the field. Also, Reese could hear me coming and I often saw the Jeep half way to the strip when I came over the camp. After some reconnoitering, I figured out a different approach. By coming in behind the hills north of the camp, I could get right on top of the camp without Reese hearing me coming. Then a really steep turn around, and below the top of, a big pine tree

¹ Note that we used an Advanced Trainer in this Basic Training School. This indicates how the Air Force improved the efficiency of its training programs. Before I was discharged they were actually using the AT-6 in Primary Schools!

would put me right in the middle of camp at about fifteen feet on a straight course for the strip. After I worked out that approach he never beat me to the field.

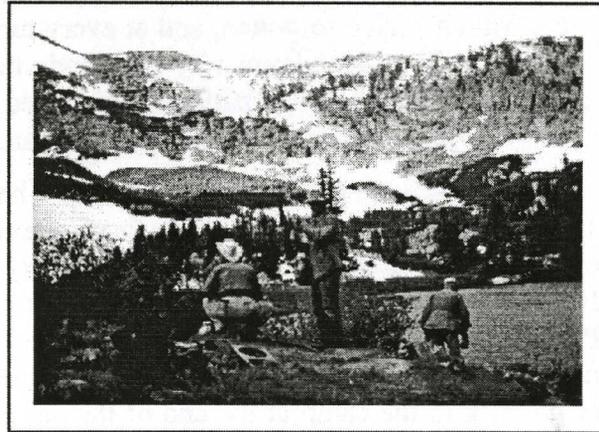


Camp on the Owens River

I'd get in around six o'clock on Friday night, stow my kit in my tent, pick up a rod and start fishing in the river just below the cook tent. The river was only about ten feet wide at the camp and filled with Loch Levin trout from eight to twelve inches – just right for eating. I would catch five or ten fish for the cook before supper. The camp could accommodate fifteen guests but there were rarely more than four or five of us. Supper was always the same. We had a big platter of fried fish, steak, potatoes and veggies.

After dinner we played nickel poker and went to bed by nine o'clock. Saturday morning I'd get up with the sun, wash up in cold water and have a cup of coffee with Cookie. He taught me to put oyster crackers in a big mug and then fill it with coffee laced with cream and sugar. That way you ate your cereal and drank your coffee at the same time and had more time for fishing. After my coffee, I fished for more Loch Levin until the other guys were ready for breakfast at seven o'clock.

After a breakfast of fried fish, pancakes, eggs and bacon, we would take off in the Jeeps for a day of fishing in one of the high mountain lakes in the area. Reese would make a fire when we got to the lake of the day and make a big pot of cowboy coffee. We lunched on a big bag of Cookie's sandwiches. You had to fish deep for the big lake trout and we were handicapped without a boat so we didn't catch many fish. But those we did catch were gigantic – up to two feet. We released these fish because the little Loch Levins were so much better eating. It was quite a treat to sit on a snow bank and fish in ice cold water in the middle of August, knowing that just an hour away, your buddies were sweltering in the hot Bakersfield summer. We would fish and explore all day, getting back to camp around four – just in time for a little nap before supper, another fish and steak dinner and some more poker. Sunday was a repeat of Saturday, although sometimes we came back to camp by noon if some of the fellows wanted to get back to the base early. In that case I would take the Jeep down to the valley where the Owens meanders through the pasture and fish for rainbows. I rarely flew back to the base before sundown because it was always so hot there in the summer. I went to this camp almost every weekend I was in Bakersfield.



High Sierra fishing

Chapter 13 – The Combat Veteran

It was especially painful for me to see the lack of respect and appreciation, even revulsion, shown towards those who served in the Viet Nam war. It was very, very different for us in WW-II. I have mentioned how easy it was to hitchhike home from Harrisburg; I never had to wait for more than three or four cars before someone gave me a ride. The kind hospitality I had from the Taylors in Arcadia was unique, but only in magnitude. I was the beneficiary of many "random acts of kindness". Often I have gone into a bar, drank a beer or two, only to be told when I asked for the check, "Your tab was paid by that guy who just left a few minutes ago." I have been treated to meals by strangers in cafes, people who just paid my bill, often without introducing themselves or saying anything to me. Another pleasant experience will illustrate the way we were treated. Bakersfield is the seat of Kern County and the annual county fair was a really big event in those days. There was a bus stop outside the camp gate where enlisted men could thumb rides to town, however, officers were not allowed to hitchhike for rides; it's not dignified. But even the good folk of Kern County could figure out that an officer standing at the bus stop would appreciate an offer of a ride to town – even if he didn't have his thumb in the air.

Early on Saturday morning of fair week found me standing at this bus stop, hoping for a ride to the fair. Before long, a big car stopped and I got in with an old guy, probably 40 or so. After a few pleasantries, he asked where I was headed. I told him, that as a good old country boy from Pennsylvania who never missed a county fair (which was true), I wanted to see what a California fair was like. He said that was fine; he was headed for the fair himself and would be glad to drop me there. We got to the fair and he pulled right onto the fairgrounds with all the parking attendants waiving him through. When we stopped, he suggested I might like to look at his exhibit before checking out the others. It turned out that he was the biggest exhibitor of cattle at the fair. He told me his name, which I have forgotten, and at every turn he introduced me to somebody else. He surely must have been known by everybody in Kern county. We spent over an hour just looking at his cattle. He patiently explained the characteristics of each breed and his hopes for each entrant when the judging began.

Then he led me to the grandstand, where he had several boxes in the front row. There were already about twenty people there, members of his family and friends, all eating, drinking and watching the program of novelty acts interspersed between the sulky races. He formally introduced me to each person in the box as "My friend Joe, from Pennsylvania". There was no way I could remember all those people. I spent the whole day with those lovely people but could not spend a penny for food or drink. When I left to go back to the camp at the end of the day, I felt like I had gained a second family in Bakersfield. This was the way it was in WW-II. If you were in the Service, you were appreciated. That attitude did much to make service life more tolerable.

September 2, 1945, "VJ-Day", the day the Japanese surrendered, was a very, very big day for us. We all knew it was coming – but we didn't know when. At mid-day, the base's loud speakers blared that there would be a "special announcement on the state of the war" that evening at retreat (the 5 p.m. flag lowering ceremony). That afternoon, every conceivable rumor raced through the camp: "The Japs have landed in Seattle!" "President Truman has resigned!" "Truman has been assassinated!" "The Japs have surrendered."

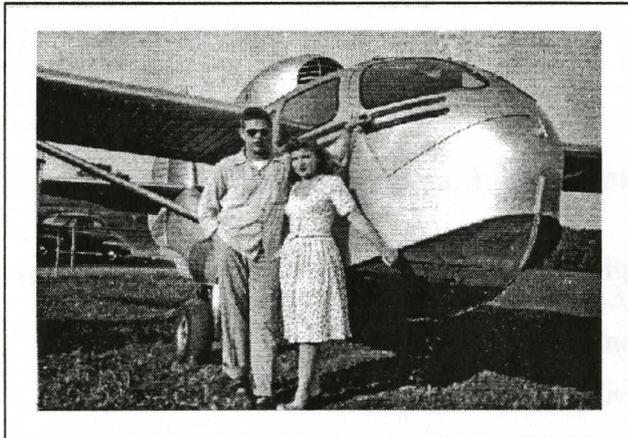
Chapter 13 – The Combat Veteran

Well before the appointed hour, Terry and I gathered with everybody else in the center of the parade grounds. A few minutes before five, the color guard and the post band marched up to the flagpole. All was silent. Then the Colonel's voice came over the speakers loud and clear. "Today, the Japanese government has surrendered. This marks the end of World War II. God bless America." The band immediately began the "Star Spangled Banner" as we all stood saluting and crying as the flag was lowered. Finally, this terrible war had come to an end.

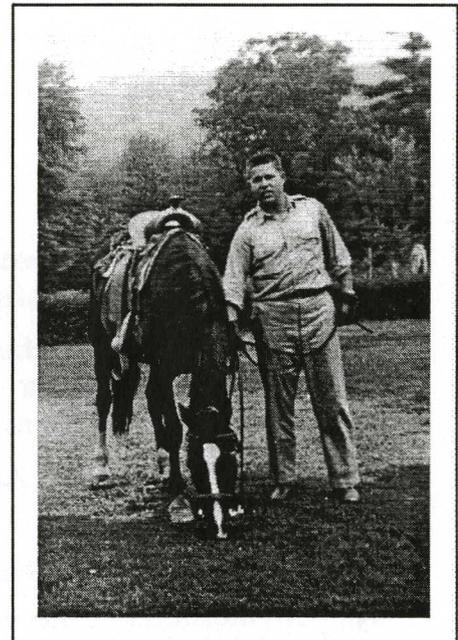
A couple of weeks later I was shipped to Houston, where I was given a discharge and an airline ticket to Harrisburg. My first flight on an airline was this Capital Airlines DC-3 and I had an overnight layover in Atlanta.

But I got home, re-enrolled in Gettysburg College, got work flying little airplanes (see left below), bought a horse (see right below), met a girl named Mary (see left below) and then

But that's another story.



With Mary and the Republic Seabee



Another red horse

Chapter 14

For The Record

As of this writing (4/16/00),

Ned Leathers is living in Toone, Tennessee, having retired from the postal office after 40 years, 1 month and 17 days of service.

Don Fisher did indeed parachute out of that airplane and spent almost a year in German POW camps. He returned to the states after V-E Day. He now lives in Florida in the winter and Michigan in summer after retiring from the telephone company.

Bob Bureau retired from the Air Force after serving in WW-II, Korea and Viet Nam and now lives in Florida.

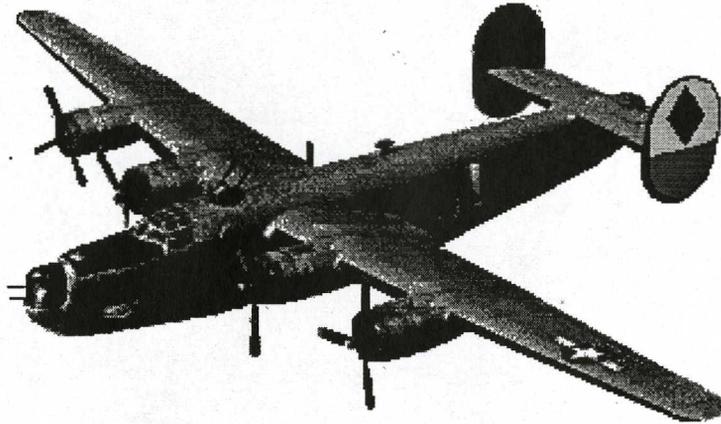
Keith Daniels is still raising cattle and grandchildren on his ranch in Kansas.

John Wells died in 1995 after a career running the Old Mill Inn in New Jersey; his widow Anita lives in Florida.

Hal McGlothlen went back to Iowa, got married and went to college. He worked for Dictaphone Corporation in Des Moines and Sioux City. Sadly, Mac died in 1973 before I started my search for my crew but I have been in contact with his children.

Frank Radics was transferred to the Pacific Theater after finishing his tour in Italy. He was killed while serving as Radio Operator on a C-46 cargo ship, which crashed while returning from Myitkyina, Burma to its base in Mohanbari, India. His remains are interred in the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery, St. Louis, MO.

I haven't yet found Walt Simmons or Louis Pappas, but I'm still looking.



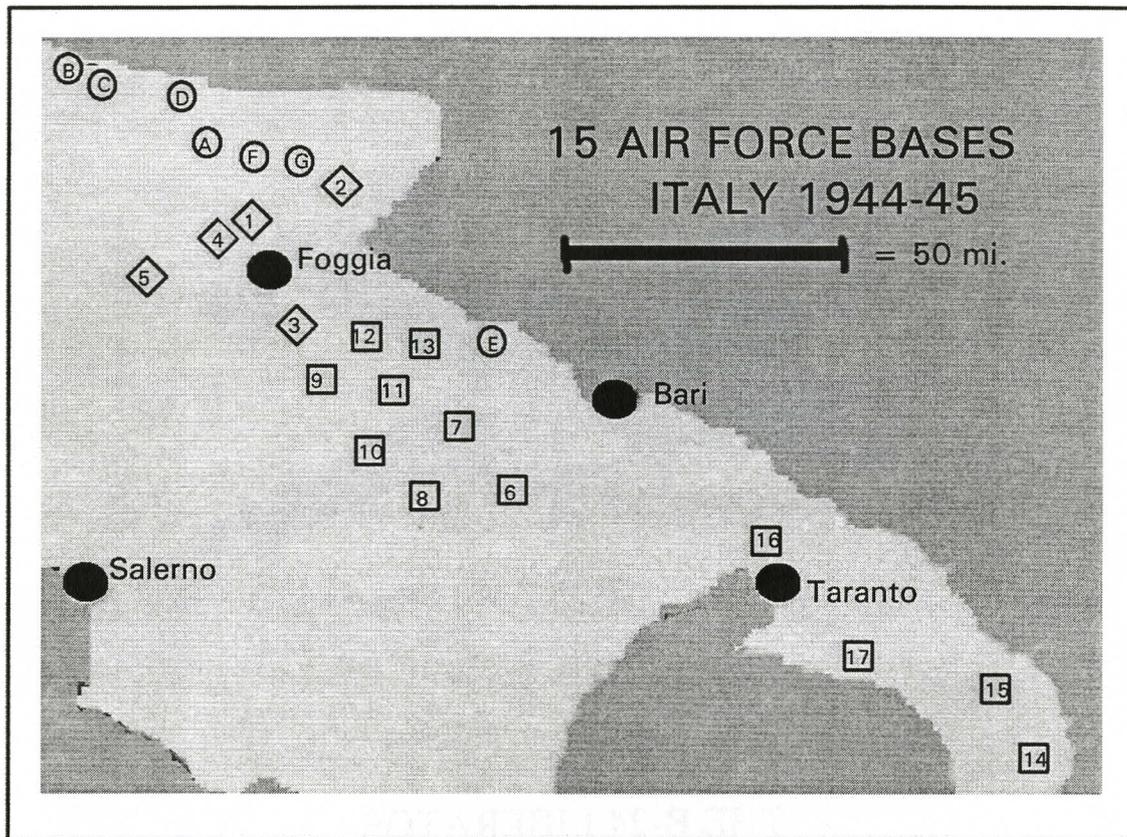
THE B-24 LIBERATOR

The B-24 Liberator was produced in greater quantities and flown in more theaters of war by the air forces of more countries than any other four engine bomber in World War II. 19,256 planes (in several versions) were produced by Consolidated Vultee, Ford Motor Company, Douglas Aircraft and North American Aircraft between the years of 1939 and 1945. Today there are only two flight-worthy B-24's in existence, and it's history and role in WW II is only dimly recalled except by those who flew in them.

The other four-engine heavy bomber, the Boeing B-17, received most of the publicity, particularly in the strategic air campaign against the Germans in Europe. Yet B-24's outnumbered the B-17's even there. B-24's could fly higher, faster, farther, carry a bigger bomb load and take more punishment from enemy fire than the fabled B-17. But as all B-24 crewmen knew, the B-17 had one feature that the B-24 never had, a built-in press agent! There just was no way for an airplane known as the "Box Car" to compete in the public's eye with the fabled "Flying Fortress."

A fully armed and combat-ready B-24 carried a crew of ten men. Its gross weight when loaded was greater than 60,000 pounds. It had, in the most common versions, four movable turrets, each with two .50 caliber machine guns and two individual .50s in the waist, making a total of ten. It was powered by four 1,200 horsepower engines and carried 2,750 gallons of fuel. Many B-24 missions were round trips of 1,500 miles and some extended ranges were near 2,000 miles.

The most common bomb-load was ten 500 pound bombs or five 1,000 pounders. It's operating environment against heavily defended targets in the European Theater was from 18,000 to 28,000 feet, although many missions (particularly in the Pacific) were flown at much lower altitudes. The planes were not pressurized or heated; crewmen wore oxygen masks on high altitude missions and were exposed to temperatures that reached -30 degrees Fahrenheit and below.



Key to Bases

Fighter Bases

A 31st Fighter Group	San Severno
B 52nd Fighter Group	Madna
C 332nd Fighter Group	Ramatelli
D 325th Fighter Group	Lesina
E 82nd Fighter Group	Vincenzo
F 14th Fighter Group	Triolo
G 1st Fighter Group	Salsola

B-17 Bomber Bases

5th Bomb Wing

1 2nd & 97th Bomb Groups	Amendola
2 99th Bomb Group	Tortarella
3 301st Bomb Group	Lucera
4 463rd Bomb Group	Celone
5 483rd Bomb Group	Separone

B-24 Bomber Bases

55th Bomb Wing

6 460th Bomb Group	Spinozza
7 464th & 465th Bomb Groups	Pantanello
8 485th Bomb Group	Venosa
49th Bomb Wing	
9 451st Bomb Group	Castellucio
10 461st & 484th Bomb Groups	Toretto

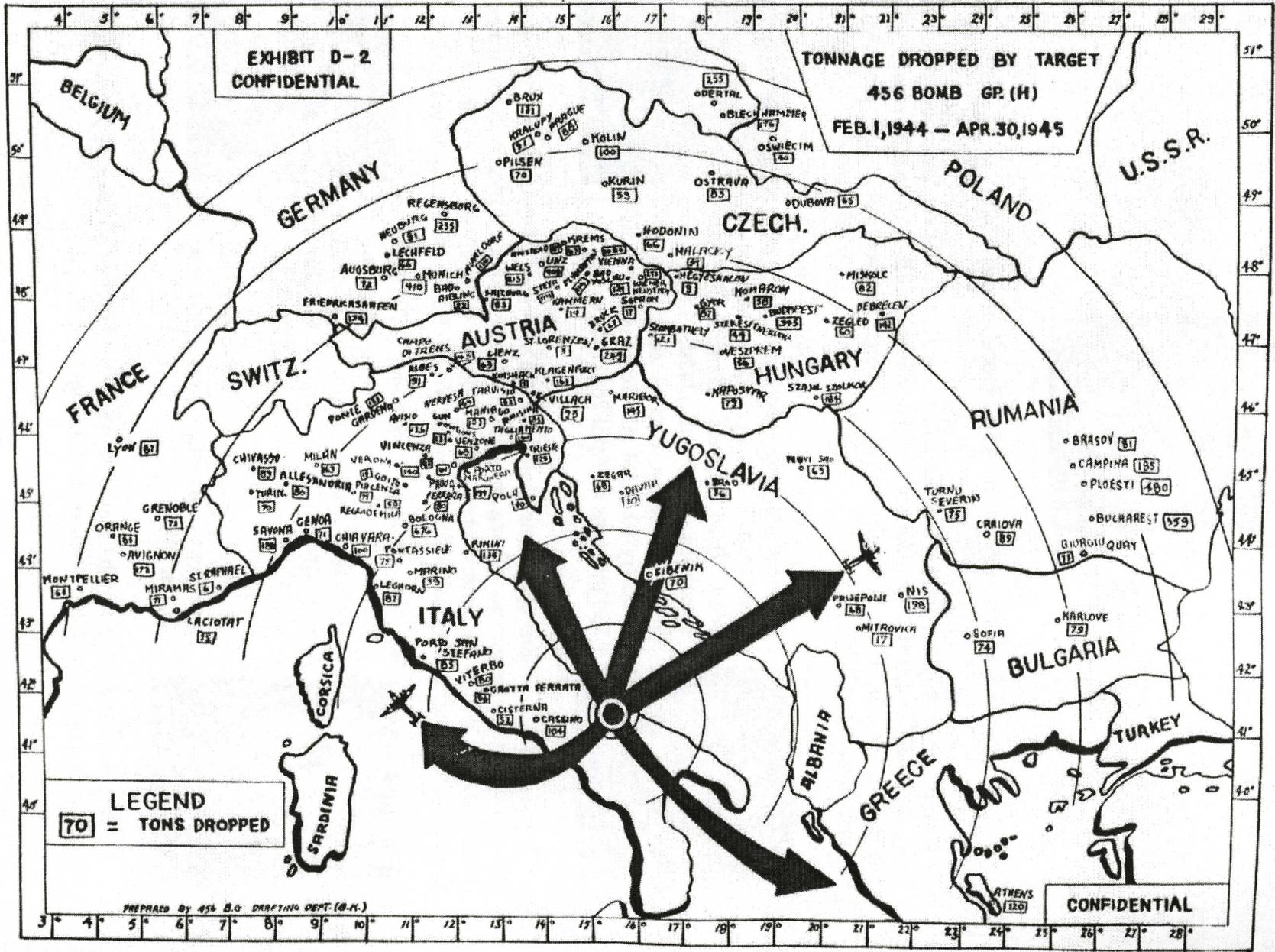
304th Bomb Wing

11 454th & 455th Bomb Groups	San Giovanni
12 456th Bomb Group	Stornara
13 459th Bomb Group	Giulia

47th Bomb Wing

14 98th Bomb Group	Lecce
15 376th Bomb Group	San Pangrazio
16 449th Bomb Group	Gottaglie
17 450th Bomb Group	Manduria

(Source: Final monthly report of 456th Bomb Group)



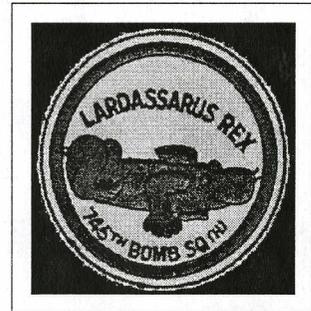


A Brief History of the 456th Bomb group (Heavy)

The 456th Bomb Group (Heavy), was activated on June 1, 1943 at Wendover Army Air Field, Utah and assigned to combat duty in the four-engine B-24 heavy bomber. It was assigned to the 403 Bomb Wing in the 15th Air Force and was based near the town of Stornara in southern Italy.



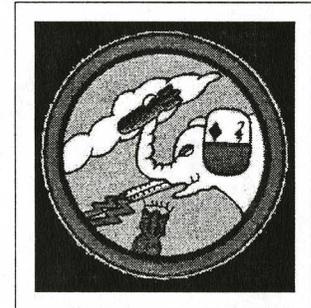
Able commanded by Colonel Thomas W. Steed, the group had a normal complement of 377 officers, 1627 enlisted men and 62 B-24 bombers. Comprised of four squadrons, the 744th, 745th, 746th and 747th, it began combat operations on February 10, 1944 and flew the last of its 254 missions on April 26, 1945.



In 15 months of combat operations, Colonel Steed's Flying Colts made over 7,000 sorties into eleven enemy countries. Flying more than 61,000 combat hours, it dropped almost 14,000 tons of bombs on enemy targets from Odertal, Germany in the North, to Athens, Greece, in the South, Montpelier, France in the West to Bucharest, Rumania in the East.

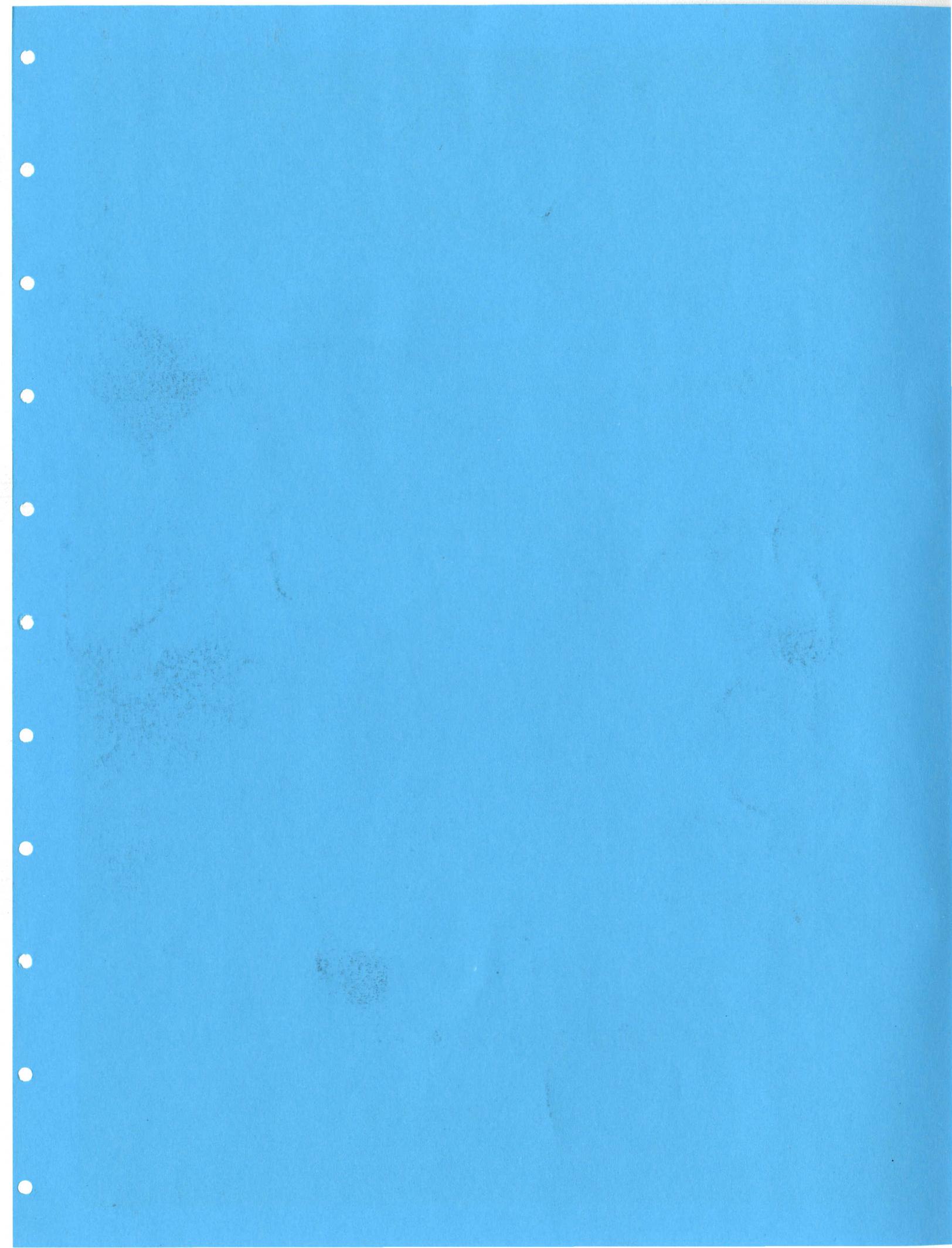


Its gunners expended 795,586 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition, destroying or probably destroying 183 enemy aircraft (in the air). It lost 114 aircraft (56 to flak, 25 to enemy aircraft, 22 to other combat causes and 11 to non-combat events). Of the 74,092 personal sorties flown, 910 crewmen were KIA or MIA.



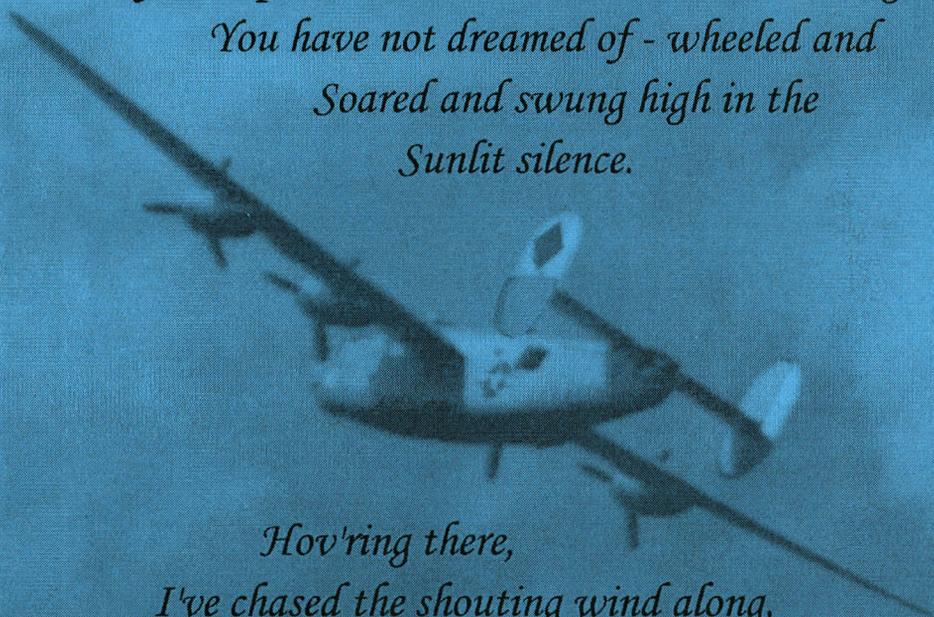
In July, 1945, the 456th Bomb Group returned to the Smoky Hill Air Field, in Kansas and was re-designated as the 456th Bombardment Group (Very Heavy).

On October 17, 1945, the Group was inactivated, thereby ending a very illustrious wartime contribution to our country.



High Flight

*Oh, I have slipped the surley bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds - and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of - wheeled and
Soared and swung high in the
Sunlit silence.*



*Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along,
And flung my eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the the long delirious burning blue
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle flew.
And while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God*

John Gillespie Magee, Jr.